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THE SISTERS MATERASSI

A NOVEL BY

ALDO PALAZZESCHI

THE Sisters Materassi

BY ALDO PALAZZESCHI

Teresa and Carolina Materassi had lived all their lives in the tiny village of Santa Maria near Florence. And all their lives they had toiled at their bridal trousseau business until now, when they might well have relaxed and enjoyed the fruits of their increasingly successful labors, they continued to work because they knew of nothing else to do.

Suddenly their lives changed. Remo, the fourteen-year-old orphan of a younger sister, came to live with them in the old house at Santa Maria . . . came like a breath of fresh air from the outside world to enliven their stuffy existence. Remo was handsome, captivating—and a schemer. Soon the sisters and their elderly cook, Niobe, were completely under his spell. Teresa took inordinate pride in showing off the charming nephew in front of their wealthy and often titled clients. Carolina found her withered bosom stirred by longings that would have shocked her had she understood them. And Niobe, who by then should have learned her lesson about handsome young men, became Remo's devoted slave.

Thus begins the intimate and engaging tale of ten years of unquestioning adoration . . . and its consequences. Full of humor and surprises, overflowing with warmth and understanding, this story is one of the most human and delightful to come from the pen of the distinguished Italian novelist, Aldo Palazzeschi.

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The Sisters Materassi

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The Sisters Materassi



by Aldo Palazzeschi

Translated by Angus Davidson

1953

DOUBLEDAY & COMPANY, INC., GARDEN CITY, NEW YORK

The characters, and the incidents in this book
are entirely the product of the author's imagination
and have no relation to any person or event in real life.

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The Sisters Materassi

CHAPTER I

Santa Maria a Coverciano

FOR the benefit of those who do not know Florence, or who know it only a little, from a hurried glimpse or a passing visit, I wish to say that it is a very gracious and lovely city closely surrounded with a most harmonious circle of hills. It must not be supposed, from the word "closely," that the unfortunate inhabitant of the town has to lift his nose in the air in order to see the sky, as if he were at the bottom of a well: quite the contrary; and I will add also the word "pleasingly," which seems to me entirely appropriate, since the hills diminish gradually in size, from the highest which are entitled to be called mountains and reach a height of over three thousand feet, to the slight, odd-shaped ones that are only about three hundred feet high, or even half that height. I must add that it is only on one side, and only for a brief space, that the hill which verges upon the city overhangs it steeply, forming a kind of balcony, upon which we may walk with the utmost delight. The way up to it is by flights of steps:

*Per le scalèe che si fèro ad etade
ch'era sicuro 'l quaderno e la doga.¹*

¹"... steps made in the former time

When stave and ledger were yet uncorrupt."

(Dante, *Purgatorio* XII, 104,5. Tr. Laurence Binyon.)

If anyone does not understand, I must explain that this original method of calling one's contemporaries forgers and thieves is much in vogue at Florence; and we, who would never have the audacity to contradict the Divine Master, must admit that they were so and proceed on our way. There are, then, flights of steps, or streets so steep that their names suffice to show their character—Costa Scarpuccia, Erta Canina, Rampe di San Nicolò . . . The hill above forms the part of the Viale dei Colli which leads up to the Piazzale Michelangiolo and which many people must have heard of even if they have not seen it, or must have pictured to themselves through the medium of photographs, prints, and post cards.

The consequence, then, of the lie of the land is that, between the city and its surrounding hills, there are stretches of flat country varying in extent and separating it from them by distances of as much as two or three miles, sometimes less, sometimes more.

I said "most harmonious," for the thing that leaps to the eye of the spectator—even if he is inattentive, commonplace, or indifferent—is the line of hills which, once seen, will not be easily erased from the memory. This harmony is produced by the most unexpected irregularities, of which chance only could be the architect; and I would stress the high significance—I might compare it to a miraculous and mysterious aroma—which surrounds that word when it is pronounced among us; and would declare, to make my meaning plain, that when it happens that chance plays the architect, all the architects of the earth stand and stare. To these unexpected irregularities no one could possibly suggest any correction, could add or take away anything; for there is no lapse into the gloomy or the horrid, into the romantic, the sensual, or the nostalgic; the landscape maintains a clear, luminous tone of lordliness, of elegance, of civilized beauty.

If at first the architects of the earth were struck dumb with admiration at what the aforesaid chance had been able to accomplish. I must hasten to add that, once they had taken a good look

at it, they did not stand still with their hands in their pockets, but, as a result of their scrutiny, enhanced their own boldness with so much wisdom that I am bound to state that man, by his own work, doubled the beauty of all that the work of chance had been able to achieve. For the inestimable merit of these hills is that they are studded with villas and castles built at the most interesting points, facing in all directions, of all periods and all styles, and never disturbing the general harmony; surrounded in their turn by parks and gardens which, instead of producing an atmosphere of dream-like or fairy-tale unreality, contrive, by virtue of a kind of severity and refinement, to create an illusion of simplest reality, of domestic intimacy, of stable nobility, of sobriety and good sense, and of modesty even when the size of the buildings makes it difficult to conceal their strength. Besides these country houses and castles, there are smaller and humbler villas, little houses and cottages, villages and hamlets, which together, owing to the lie of the land, form a total picture that leaves the eye insatiable because of the inexhaustible number of discoveries it can make, and brings it to the inevitable conclusion that the second artificer, through having so deeply loved and understood the first, gained possession of his secret to such an extent that now all appears to have been wrought by him—by man, that is, who, as we look round, is always and everywhere visible to us, man in his most exalted and most worthy forms of expression.

Whenever I have had occasion to accompany strangers, or Italians from another part of the country, over these hills, they have never succeeded in finding more than one single word to express the diversity of the view and the variety of their own feelings and appreciation—“Beautiful! Beautiful! Beautiful!” repeated over and over again in many different tones of voice—sometimes with teeth slightly clenched; but it is understandable that the man who was exclaiming “Beautiful!” had another beauty in his heart and, like all lovers, being unable to admit any beauty to be superior to that of his own love, was disturbed just for one instant by a feeling of suspicion; for it is a word that produces

in the memory, and in a man's proper pride, an extremely pleasing refrain, or rather a symphony, discordant yet perfectly harmonious, like the hills of Florence.

There are, as I have said, stretches of flat country side by side with the hills, which you, as you go through them on an expedition or a visit—on foot, by tram or motorcar—pass by with indifference; or, as you pass, you are looking ahead, almost exclusively, to your goal on the far side of the plain or your final objective high above, displeased, almost, that the stretch of flat country should be so long and should separate you from that objective, even for a little while. This region forms, of course, a secondary, neglected—if not negligible—part, of no importance in the realm of beauty; humble, resigned to being trodden by those who are going beyond. It is no one's goal except from necessity, yet it, too, is populated by villas and houses, by villages and hamlets of a mild and renunciatory character; and, having abandoned the idea of imposing its own charm, it sits watching the passers-by with well-bred tolerance and resignation, and a touch of boredom; rarely giving way, through exhaustion of patience, to any act of irritation or revolt, overcoming its boredom by hard work and deriving from work the strength to endure boredom.

I will even go so far as to say that if in this countryside the hills occupy the position of the lady—and almost always she is the true lady, the princess—the plain takes the place of the servant, the chambermaid or handmaid; and even the most benevolent and courteous of passers-by concedes to her no more than the kind of cordiality one gives to the woman who opens the door when one goes to call upon her mistress. Or again, in the most fortunate instance, it may occupy the position of the lady-companion who maintains her own social rank with dignity and composure yet without allowing herself to criticize, showing nothing but admiration and good nature, scarcely lowering her eyelids or twisting her lips at the large amount of dust she is compelled, by the other's fault, to swallow from morning to night, and at the mud that all the coming and going creates in

front of her house, splashing the front door right up to the top. Finally, the plain may sometimes occupy the position of a beggar, suppliant at the lady's feet.

Let me relate the names of some of these hills, for they suffice to convey my meaning far better than words: Bellosguardo—and observe that there are many where the view is even more beautiful; Il Gelsomino, Giramonte, Il Poggio Imperiale, Torre del Gallo, San Gersolè, Settignano, Fiesole, Vincigliata and Castel di Poggio, Montebeni, Il Poggio delle Tortore, Montiloro, L'Apparita and L'Incontro, Monte Asinario, Il Giogo, Monte Morello . . . Listen, on the other hand, to the names of the places in the plain: Rifredi, Le Caldine, Le Panche, Peretola, Legnaia, Soffiano, Petriòlo, Brozzi, Campi, Quarto, Quinto, Sesto . . . Even pedestrian fancy gives out; they seem like the products of an emasculated imagination.

To the lady, the princess, belong all honours and favours, all liberties and many licences; to her are permitted flights and caprices, every variety of display and richness of ornament, for which all material usefulness is sacrificed to the delight of the eye; and vain would it be, considering her pride and the nature of her character, to ask her to make herself useful for anything else besides her pure visual attractiveness—which in any case is by no means small, and of which she is proud in the highest degree.

Trees twisted, tortured perhaps by some intimate, racking problem; nervous, hysterical, ascetic, wiry, gazing at the sky with deep and languishing eye, or displaying a nakedness like that of Christ on the cross. Never a thoughtless, good-natured plumpness, a pleasingness of muscle or skin.

Insolent, proud, her sway accepted, she never takes it into her head to look at her subordinate; or gives her, at most, a quick close inspection askance and from above, a look of condescension intended merely to irritate and to display her own unquestioned superiority.

The poor servant, on the other hand, looks up at her from below

with half-closed eyes, pretending not even to notice the disrespectful way in which she is treated; she keeps her head bowed so as not to lose her temper when she observes how overbearingly the other one behaves, how useless and how vain she is, how capricious and coy: she clings to her own virtues, proving herself patient, industrious, submissive. It is she who prepares the long rows of cabbages and artichokes, the lettuces, the turnips, the cucumbers, the eggplants and the marrows, the tender peas, the tasty asparagus—all that the other woman devours in her villas inhabited by the rich, in her famous and much-frequented restaurants; it is she who must bustle about from morning till night so that all these delights shall grow fine and full of flavour; and since it is not enough that the ground should be ceaselessly inundated with water, the other one sends down to her something that does not smell pleasant, something that she herself is delighted to get rid of, since for her it represents nothing but filth which she sends away “down there!” with a gesture of disgust, while the poor woman below stands waiting for it as a gift of Providence, for the benefits it brings her. So that, as well as closing her eyes from resignation and her mouth from prudence, she has, every now and then, to hold her nose so as not to smell the reek: all these openings she has to stop up, poor disregarded creature, in order to please the highly scented lady up above. Nor will I detain you long to tell you what happens during a storm. One of these ladies goes into contortions, wrinkles up her nose, fumes with rage, protests loudly, utters threats and shrieks and imprecations, plays the fool in a thousand ways; but once the storm has exhausted itself, she immediately recovers, straightens herself up, regains her freshness and brilliance and gaiety, and in half an hour is more beautiful than ever. The other one, on the contrary, sprawls prostrate, outspread to receive the downpour, opening her lap to welcome all the drain water that she absorbs continuously, and content to remain dirty for a whole week.

It is, to be exact, one of these little minor villages that I am

undertaking to describe to you; and it is there that the events of the following tale occur.

Santa Maria a Coverciano is not even a little village; it is a mere group of people—by which I mean a nucleus with no independent civil existence but held together in spiritual union by a church.

It might, strictly speaking, be possible to discern the ghost of a village there; a kind of crooked *piazza* takes shape at a cross-roads where there is a Franciscan convent surrounded by very high walls, at the corner of which, under a little rustic roof, is displayed the effigy of Saint Francis in marble, and a stone to record that the Saint's habit was preserved in this convent for some centuries. Then there is a villa which is always shut up; it is encompassed by a circular wall and it stands far back with great trees all round it—like an old lady in a very full skirt and a cap, sitting in an armchair. And in front of it, almost on the road, stands a small modern villa, coquettish, rather shameless, staring, like a petulant, spiteful daughter-in-law, at its austere, grumbling mother-in-law and spouting out roses at her, as if poking fingers into her eyes, from a white-painted iron railing that serves not so much to hide the little house as to attract attention to it. Tucked into a recess beside the villa is a little church with a single-arched porch which invites you from its corner, in a reserved and gentle manner, to take part in the idyll of the faith.

A little way beyond the modern house and still opposite the villa is a block of houses in the form of a square that makes you think of the courtyard of a convent; but this is a lay convent, closed in by the wall along the road, the length of which is broken only by a great wooden door destined to remain permanently shut, since the inhabitants make use of a little tiny door at the side of it which is destined to remain permanently open, like a pigeonhole of which the key has been mislaid. The farthest side of this building is composed of a three-storeyed house which has something of a beehive look about it, like all poor people's dwellings; and the wings which join on to the wall beside the road are long and narrow and have only two floors. It is imme-

diately obvious that this structure must have been built at various periods, and that the south wing is much more ancient and different in type from the rest, for it is not only of a more gentlemanly architectural style, with some remains of ornamental dignity, but has all its windows facing, not, like the others, on to the courtyard, but over the fields, southwards towards Florence; and it turns its back disdainfully on the courtyard, with only one single window opening upon it, and that from a corridor at the back, so that you would think it had been put there merely in order to peep out into it at its own convenience. This privileged part of the building—the first part you come to—possesses its own private entrance from the road, a white iron gate of which one half is always open and which is much eaten away by rust.

The main road which passes through this little settlement, forming the open space I have already described, leads from Florence to Ponte a Mensola and Settignano, and is called the Settignano road; the other, smaller one, which comes down between the villa and the Franciscan convent, goes, on the other hand, to Maiano, with its quarries and its magnificent villas. A genuine castle stands above it, called Poggio Gherardo.

The inhabitants of the place, and those who are familiar with it, call it simply Santa Maria; the townspeople, on the other hand, more up-to-date and less intimate, call it merely Coverciano. It must not be supposed that this is due to any cleft between Free-masons and the clerical party—God preserve us from such a thing; the variation in name merely reveals indifference on one side and intimacy and love on the other.

Having thus described as best I can the situation of the place, I must also tell how it lies between two streams—the Africo and the Mensola, the first of which comes down from Fiesole, the second from Vincigliata. They are mere rivulets, in which moon and sun kindle only a thread of silver or gold half hidden amongst the long grass, but which, at the moment of a thunder-storm, become suddenly noisy, threatening, turbulent: they rage and overflow their banks with all the impetuosity of youth, and

then, after an hour, all is over; they are like children exhausted after making a great deal of noise.

It is not by chance that I have mentioned these two streams, and now I will tell you why. It is the pride of these hills to remember the great characters of history, princes and kings, poets, scholars, artists of our own and foreign lands who have lived and worked here, who came here to seek repose or inspiration, forgetfulness, creative force, serenity or escape, a refuge in the past or vigour for the future, an asylum for joy as well as for grief. . . . But this field is so vast that space forbids me to venture upon it, and I will say only that between these two streams, so it is said, stood the house where Giovanni Boccaccio lived his *Decameron*, or dreamed it all and perhaps wrote it—this is not clearly known; for no one is in a position to affirm with certainty where the place truly was, and that is the reason why, in this region, there are several “houses of Boccaccio,” and they take a firm stand, and it is not noticeable that any one of them is willing to moderate its claim in face of any other, or in face of the most positive contradictions or vagueness of attribution. They do right not to yield; we can forgive them all for their centuries-old tenacity and even for their bad faith; they do right to crown their houses or villas with such a name, the name with which I, today, wish to crown this tale which unfolds at their feet, adding to it the reverent greeting of a humble, far-distant descendant.

“Every star was already fled from the eastern parts of the heavens, except only that one which we call Lucifer, which still shone in the whitening dawn, when the seneschal, rising, went with a great baggage-train into the valley of the women, there to make all ready in accordance with the order and commandment received from his lord. After his going no long time passed before the King also arose, wakened by the clatter of the baggage-animals and of those loading them; and having risen, he caused the women and the young men all to arise also. Nor had the rays

of the sun fully dawned when all took the road; and never at any time had the nightingales and other birds seemed to them to sing so gaily as they sang that morning: accompanied by whose songs, they came at last to the valley of the women, where they were received by many more persons, and it seemed to them that all rejoiced at their coming. And then, as they compassed the place about and fitted it up all afresh, it seemed to them even fairer than it had seemed the day before, inasmuch as the time of day was now in conformity with the place. And then, after they had broken their fast with good wine and sweetmeats, in order that they might not be surpassed in song by the birds, they began to sing, and the valley with them, repeating ever the same songs that they repeated: to which all the birds, as though unwilling to be defeated, added notes both sweet and new. But when the hour of the repast had come, tables were placed beneath the evergreens and other fair trees, close to the fair small lake, as it pleased the King, and so they went and sat down, and as they ate, they saw the fishes swimming in the lake in great shoals: which gave cause not only for observation but sometimes for argument. As soon as they had come to the end of their repast, and the viands and the tables had been removed, they began to sing even more joyously than before. Then, beds having been made in many places throughout the little valley, and all of them having been, by the discreet seneschal, surrounded and enclosed with French curtains and hangings, by leave of the King, to whom this appeared pleasing, all might go and sleep; and those who did not wish to sleep might take their other accustomed delights at their pleasure. But as the hour had now come when all had risen again, and it was time for them to meet together to recount tales as the King wished, they had carpets spread upon the grass not very far from the place where they had feasted, and there they sat down, near to the lake; and the King commanded Emilia that she should begin. And she joyfully began to speak, smiling. . . .”

When I wander round this neighbourhood, smiling incredulously over the doubtful authenticity of some house in question,

granting legitimacy to all of them for their noble aspirations and their love; and when I read on a marble plaque at Ponte a Mensola this legend: "Giovanni Boccaccio Recreational Club," I am tempted to enter—to see what? How eagerly my eye searches amongst the cypresses and the olives for something that cannot be seen—what? Amongst the heath and the broom and the myrtle, like someone who searches for miraculous herbs, all my senses search hungrily to find the place where—unless it be that the seed is lost—your pure and genial sprightliness, Messer Giovanni, is hidden.

CHAPTER II

“Materassi Sisters”

AND now that I have described as best I could the surrounding landscape, I shall begin to take note with you of the things which, at first sight, particularly arouse our curiosity as we examine the assemblage of houses known as Santa Maria a Coverciano.

Apart from an excessive number of things that have only a swift, passing concern with it—or, to be more exact, are concerned with it in a wrongful way and in the spirit we have already discussed, and which do not in any respect concern *us*—our attention is caught by one thing that does truly and closely concern it, in the most heartfelt manner, and that is the frequent stopping of lordly motorcars at the always half-open iron gate of the house which has already been mentioned and which is destined to be the centre of all our hopes—stoppings which last the time of the formal visits and, not uncommonly, of the confidential visits that ladies of so-called high society habitually exchange. Even in the time of horse carriages you could gaze admiringly outside that gate at a pair of black or bay horses pawing the ground in the ardour of their impatience, with heads held high, all glossy and shining, proud of their costly trappings and displaying mouths as fresh as flowers as they chewed the bit;

just as today you could see a superb and luxuriously appointed motorcar. And another observation cannot escape the expert eye—that three perfectly distinct types of persons get out at that gate, whether it was, formerly, from those old-fashioned carriages or, today, from the latest kind of motorcar.

First, ladies of full maturity accompanied by young girls, both of them of a blameless elegance proportionate to age and figure, for a poetical description of whom one is inclined, usually, to fall back upon a floral comparison: a rose and a rosebud. But, if the mother sometimes makes a display of her own resemblance to a full-blown rose—to put it in a gallant, polite manner—the daughter displays a conscious likeness to a lily—to put it chastely and mildly—which has reached the end of its own pure whiteness.

The second category consists of elderly, in fact positively old, ladies; old not only in years but by choice; unassailably ugly and wrinkled, and doing nothing to lessen or conceal the cruel work of nature, the inexorable work of time, in their faces and figures, but rather anticipating old age by running joyfully to meet all its catastrophic effects; and dressed in such a humble, obscure manner, going far beyond mere indifference towards the fashions of the moment, as to be an offence to the eye. There are some women who constitute, in the end, not merely an ostentatious abdication but a decided protest, a gesture of insult towards other women, towards the age they live in and the charms of feminine beauty and grace, so that it arouses an instinctive astonishment to see them getting in and out of such fine, glossy carriages; one would be much less surprised to see them slipping out in the early morning, with bag or basket, to the butcher and the green-grocer, the sausage shop and the chemist's, or running aimlessly along and then, at a certain moment, pulling a handkerchief out of a worn and greasy purse, to weep over a timid and decent poverty.

Again—but this is a rarer event—you may see, getting out of the tram and going in at that same gate, an important prelate; his importance being shown by a dignity of bearing in which reserve

and slowness are combined, and at the same time by a flash of violet silk between garment and collar. Or a young priest, still black as a bumblebee except for the red in his cheeks, may pop up from goodness knows where.

If at this moment you feel the sharp point of curiosity pricking you, you must be wondering who can possibly live in an old house in the Florentine plain, in appearance a modest village house, capable of attracting persons so eminent and so diverse. You must be thinking that the mistress of the house possesses some exceptional art, to be capable of bringing together people so far apart both in habits and in age; capable, too, of stimulating at the same time our inquisitiveness and our admiration.

It sometimes happens, also, that one of these cars comes to a sudden stop in the neighbourhood of the house and that the lady inside, or the driver, asks some poor woman or child standing in the road for a piece of information, which is always the same: "The Materassi sisters? Can you tell me where to find them? Where do they live?" And before the name is out of their mouths, all hands are raised without hesitation and point resolutely at the rusty white gate which stands always half open and upon the pillars of which sit two terra cotta lions which surpass all farm-yard animals in tameness, seeming indeed more like two old women in conversation on a summer evening, their wasted mouths half open because of the stuffiness of the air and their own shortness of breath. And to whom should all these aristocratic people be paying visits in this place, except to them?

Entering the iron gate, we find ourselves on a path above which the windows of the low, oblong house open—that is to say, on the first floor five windows, all the same size, with green shutters, three being grouped together in the middle, and the other two, at a greater distance, at each side; and four on the ground floor, with light, white-painted iron grilles in place of the shutters—these too, like the iron gate, eaten with rust. In the middle, at the top of three chipped stone steps, is the glass entrance door, round-topped and provided with a big green shutter running on two rails.

In front of the house, on a low wall, are placed, quite unsymmetrically, a few not very imposing vases, and one sees that they form a part of the whole only in a negligent manner, revealing none of the housewifely affection, so obvious when it is there, that gives such things a face and a voice like those of living creatures, but showing, rather, a forgetfulness caused not by indigence but by cares more serious and more pressing. For twelve or fifteen yards beyond the low wall there is a piece of ground, neither field nor garden, in a state of neglect, with some old lime trees growing in it whose scanty foliage keeps neither air nor light from the house, exposed, as it is, to the full south.

In the background, with nothing else between, can be seen the farmland, with its rows of bare maple trees upon which, as upon rough male arms, the vines appear to be struggling or lying prostrate, with feminine languors or feminine guile, clinging tenaciously or dangling in a swoon; so that one of these fields makes one think of the famous Rape of the Sabine Women, who, as they felt themselves seized, cannot all have been of the same opinion in the matter.

Not merely does the gate remain always half open, even at night—probably no key has existed since some far-remote period—but, for a great part of the year, from the early hours of the morning until twilight, the glass door with the green shutter is also left wide open, revealing a big entrance hall which contains, besides the door, the two windows which flank it closely on each side.

We must observe this room closely, for it may be said to be the principal scene, the foundation upon which our story is built.

A big cupboard of good walnut against the left-hand wall as one enters, tall, long, but devoid of ornament, makes one think, naturally, of a linen room; while, against the first part of the opposite wall, close to the window, a console table, also of walnut and with a carved mirror, reminds one of a reception room; and beside it, against the same wall, a chest of drawers with a white marble top flashes the image of a bedroom across one's mind;

against the far wall a low and very capacious sofa, almost like a bath, does not quite bring to mind a bathroom but rather another room for receptions of a very intimate and good-natured kind; and finally, in the middle, a square table of common wood, extremely large and with turned legs, over the middle of which there descends from the ceiling an old hanging oil lamp surrounded by candles and with three electric bulbs stuck on underneath, brings to one's eyes a vision of a patriarchal family of twelve persons sitting in front of smoking soup bowls. Above the sofa is a second mirror in a gilded frame, and above the chest of drawers an oleograph representing one of the Stations of the Cross, with Jesus, all white and glistening against a background of gloomy, repellent green, gazing pensively and sweetly at the panorama of Jerusalem. Beneath the two windows stand two little tables, one round and one oval, at each side.

It would not be easy, in face of the bizarre appearance of this encyclopaedic room, to advance any prognosis or conjecture on the subject, were it not that one thing, leaping to the eye, brings about an immediate revelation of its true essence. On the sofa and on the tables, on the console and on the chest of drawers, on the armchairs and other chairs that go to make up the furnishing of the room, on boxes of all sizes and shapes—wherever things can be put, there you see, everywhere, the same kind of thing: in shreds and in snippets, in complete pieces, in squares and in strips, laid out or piled in heaps, linens, muslins, gauzes, crepes, tulles, tapes and twists, ribbons and silks, white for the most part or of pale colours, bright colours in a minority. And although the pieces of furniture are pretty numerous and of imposing size, in the remaining space—that is, round the table or leaning against the empty wall—you may see embroidery frames with sulky faces turned to the wall or boldly exhibiting themselves, frames of all shapes and sizes, over each one of which is stretched a white cloth of special secrecy, making the room look like a stage before or after a performance but revealing to us, without fear of any mistake, the presence of industrious and active needle-

women. But, to describe their qualifications more precisely, although their real speciality is their embroidery, on account of which they enjoy a widespread fame and a solid reputation, I must mention that officially—as can be read at the top of their invoices—the Materassi sisters are makers of lingerie

MATERASSI SISTERS

Lingerie  *Bridal trousseaux*

Close to that glass door which is always open in warm weather, or behind its closed panes, a foot warmer their only comfort, during the cold season, they sit facing each other, bent over their frames, raising their heads or coming closer together for assent or consultation, from early in the morning until twilight, and, as soon as the sunlight grows feeble, pulling down over their frames two powerful lamps which, during the daytime, hang high like fruits above their heads; or they stand at the big table, frowning over the straight path of the scissors, concentrating their thought upon it in the act of cutting; or again, for drawing out their designs, they sit, with bowed heads, at the two little tables under the windows.

At the time at which this tale begins, Teresa and Carolina, the two Materassi sisters, had reached the age of fifty with one year's difference between them; or rather, to be more exact, they were astride that age, since the figure of fifty came between the one and the other.

Sturdy in figure and almost tall, Teresa was an energetic and determined woman; and although her expression and bearing often revealed how hard she worked, she always concealed her fatigue. Her hair, still of a glossy blackness and arranged very simply, pulled back, as it were, over the curve of her head, made conspicuous the few scattered white threads, most frequent at the

temples. Her black eyes, large and very deep-set, were encircled by dark shadows shading off into the skin of her face, which had become not only faded but dried up and was now no longer olive but grey and dusty-looking. Everything in her revealed the strain of a courageous and difficult existence, with a femininity that had been buried like a transient joy or a luxury that she could not afford. It was a femininity which reappeared only in rare, brief moments of repose, and which was denied to her not, now, by necessity but by a habit of thought and drudgery that had become a rule. More conspicuous, in this woman, than physical strength was the moral strength that sustained her.

In contrast to her sister, Carolina had preserved intact her external femininity which, with the fading of her looks and the isolated life she led, had been gradually accentuated and rarefied, until it had turned into languor or downright affectation. Although she was hardly smaller than her sister, she appeared shorter and slimmer too, but above all more supple; and even beneath the burden of the most assiduous toil her body had preserved its snake-like elasticity, causing her to yield constantly to a desire to draw herself in at the waist, to touch some part of herself, to feel herself, to pull herself up so as to relax again more fully, thus giving herself an illusory, precarious relief. Most especially would she pull herself up and twist herself about at the appearance of somebody, and all the more if that person was of importance or consequence; whereas her sister would fix her eyes on the same person's face without any look of haughtiness but with the assurance of one who is accustomed to dealing with people and to listening attentively, to understanding quickly and making herself understood. Carolina behaved like a flower on its stalk when the sun appears in the morning, or when it composes its shape again after the buffettings of a storm. This studied lis-someness made people think her fragile, though she was extremely strong; like those bushes which are so infinitely pliable that no wind can break them. She had chestnut hair with light shades in it, very thick and fine and flowing; and this she wore

in an insecure, restless kind of fashion which gave her an excuse for making gestures of affected and languid gracefulness. Although the silver threads on her head were more plentiful than on that of her sister, they were not easily visible except from very close, for the new silver and the old gold were still well mixed together. Her extremely light eyes, not exactly blue but lavender colour, were like two pale discs; they were entirely without any power of concentration, they expressed no vestige of will power, they looked at you without any depth in them; and, their look being accompanied by a smile of the thick, pouting lips, you had the impression that she was gazing at herself in a mirror, restraining her feeling of complacency at her own beauty and superiority not out of modesty but in order to enjoy it fully. Her face was soft and pale, both pallor and softness being the result of hard work. As well as differing from her by reason of this external femininity, she looked several years younger than her sister, though in reality she was younger only by one year.

Chance, but more than chance the vicissitudes of life, and, to be more exact, those of the family, had willed that these two should be indissolubly united and should remain old maids; for, against the threatened ruin of their family, they had provided first a bulwark, then a support, and finally had achieved a reconstruction worthy of the highest praise.

The part of the building inhabited by them was an old manor house—it could not be called either a villa or a poor people's house, both on account of its ample size and because of the arrangement of its rooms; and the continuation of the building, with a separate entrance by an iron gate from a lesser road, constituted the dwelling house, sheds, and stables belonging to the peasant farmer of a quite large and very productive farm, the property of the sisters. On the side towards the main road, inside the convent-like wall, the two wings of the building already described formed, with the back of the sisters' house, a vast courtyard, with a well in the middle; these wings consisted of clean and humble dwellings that sheltered, in all, fourteen families of

well-behaved, respectable people of the working class—small employees and workmen in good circumstances, amongst whom there was no sign either of disorderliness or of indigence.

This property and these wise building operations are deserving of a few words of description. They were the work of the sisters' paternal grandfather, who had been, in his time, land agent in the service of a noble family in this district and who, with the savings of a sober and industrious life, first acquired the house and farm, establishing his own residence there, and then, with the revenues from it, built, in three stages, the large group of houses beside it, for letting out to tenants, thus turning the whole into a pleasant and good-sized property.

It came about, however, that the only son of this honest and industrious rustic, father of our needlewomen, did not follow in the tracks of his father's wisdom and love of construction, but preferred to travel by very different roads; and this, it must be observed, not merely with the approbation or acquiescence of his father but, I will even say, to his most intimate, if unconfessed, satisfaction. Growing up in conditions of comfort and liberality which increased steadily during the best part of his youth, he was the whole joy and pride of the old land agent who had had this only son late in life and who, having himself been abstemious to the point of tyranny in all matters of worldly pleasure, had had the ambition, and at the same time the weakness, to see his son grow up in an entirely different manner—the other way round, in fact; just as though virtue were not a matter of principle in a man who had exercised it limitlessly: for the son was frivolous, thoughtless, capricious, spendthrift, without the slightest will to work. And as he grew to be a man, he became more and more greedy for all the attractive things that the time he lived in could provide. It was like a competition between the son and the father, the former in spending and the latter in paying. And, the more reprehensible the conduct of the former, the more did it seem to bring the latter a secret, unconfessed pleasure. Until at last, after the death of his father—who, in the last years of his life had come

to appreciate the greatness of his mistake towards his son, but without being able to keep it within bounds—the son, dissolute to the point of ruin, himself also died, long before he had reached old age, after five wretched years of progressive infirmity owing, also, to his own dissipations, leaving a wife who survived him only a short time, and four daughters, and the property so burdened with debts and mortgages that it was scarcely possible for the family to go on living there.

Such dissoluteness on the part of their father, and the humble grief of their mother—a mild, subdued creature who had led a life of trouble and sacrifice and humiliations, until she had become incurably melancholy—made the daughters grow up sensible and quiet, inured to the hardships and struggles of life, burdened with sorrow, hard-working, devoid of any aspiration towards pleasure; as though the only commandment they had received was to repair, both morally and materially, the evil deeds of their father.

When he reached his last moments this man, made irascible by his own utter ruin, had found no word of kindness or resignation in the depth of his soul. When already in the realm of death, his eyes darkening, he had shouted at his wife, driving her from his bedside: “It’s you, you sow, who are putting me in the dark.” Such was the farewell of the husband and father.

Teresa and Carolina, ever since they had been young girls, had together attended the school of a famous sewing mistress in Florence, and from the very first had shown remarkable aptitude, the former for cutting out, the latter for design and embroidery; till finally, just after they were twenty, they had set up in their own home and had built a new life for themselves, providing for their impoverished, invalid father and halting the family fortunes on the brink of a precipice. They were not yet thirty when their father died, and were already on the safe upward path towards that state in life which made them an example and a wonder to others, a secret and legitimate satisfaction to themselves.

Once alone, they were able, after a few years of ceaseless work

and aided by the counsels of one or two good, disinterested people, to make a first effort—the most difficult of all—to free the property from the bonds of mortgage—both the houses and the farm; and after this first step the deliverance became steadily quicker and easier, until at last they entered again, automatically, into possession of it.

The real needlewoman was Teresa, and she now had the reputation of being, in that line, the best and most celebrated in the whole district, including the city itself; so much so that, out of the way as she was, everyone came to look for her, and she continually had to refuse work. There was no young lady of rich or noble family, no daughter of an industrialist or businessman, who did not want to include in her trousseau at least some things—if everything was not possible—that had issued from those now famous hands; and trousseaux came to be ordered a year, or even two years, in advance, and no orders were accepted at less than six months' notice. The most surprising thing was to see how the new fashions arrived without any delay in this distant, modest corner of the countryside, and how, in their workshop in that strange room, these women whose figures showed not the vaguest or remotest sign of fashion or elegance received the latest novelties, criticized, sifted, developed, corrected them, with the finest intuition of suitability and good taste.

Carolina did fine embroidery, helping her sister in work of the greatest bulk and quickest profit, and also specializing in performances of such grace and fineness, of such virtuosity with her materials, as to leave the acutest critic puzzled. There was no stitch on this earth that was unknown to her and of which she did not know the precise method of execution, or which, having once seen, she was not capable of reproducing, so that she was able to appraise and to mend old lace or muslins or embroideries of any period. As her sister was the driving power, the governing mind, so Carolina was the artist. And just as, from their early childhood, her sister had shown signs of an aptitude for the cutting out and making of lingerie, so she had shown signs of a

talent for decoration, of an inspiration for design, of a sensibility for colour. Her supreme gift was for embroidery in silk and gold—sacred vestments, symbolic banners, standards, ensigns. This explains the appearance at that iron gate of priests and religious women of distinction, who got out of their motorcars there when they had to make a gift to a church, to a bishop or a cardinal; for she accomplished such prodigies in this type of work that they could stand comparison with the finest specimens to be admired in the glass cases of museums and galleries, which she herself, since the days of her youth, had studied with exceptional appreciation. If at any time Carolina had to finish off some piece of work such as a priest's vestment, a standard, a patriotic banner, Teresa would lay aside her chemises and drawers, and she too would take silk and gold and silver thread and would help her sister with the submissiveness of a pupil or hired assistant; and in the same way Carolina would, in return, help her in the case of a trousseau which was of special importance as regards style and mode of sewing and into which suitable decoration had to be introduced.

If they refused work every day, or accepted it only with an indefinite delay, it was because they had no wish to form a school, and no desire to move to Florence and set up a workroom on a big scale. Apart from a few young women of the neighbourhood whom they had admitted as a favour—generally tenants of theirs whom they had taught as if they were members of the family—or some old workingwoman they could trust, whom they called in at times of emergency, they had never sought any outside help; and, as for transporting themselves to Florence, they did not even think of it as long as everybody came to see them in the place where they had been born and where they had always lived. This was the main secret of their success—that the work came entirely from their own expert hands, every stitch of it, unassailable, uniform in quality, representing, for them, an endless drudgery.

In days gone by, when that kind of relationship still existed,

there had been amongst their clientele one or two famous “kept women” of an extremely expensive kind—a type which I previously omitted, judging it to be heterogeneous and ill-defined, but which was highly profitable to the two sisters, since such women were utterly reckless with exquisite lingerie without troubling about the expense, their incomes being abundant and easily come by. Do they still exist, these kept ladies? These *cocottes*? I ask, because they are no longer to be seen. Perhaps they do; I wonder. . . . But, being reduced to a rational, purely utilitarian state, they are no longer in evidence, as they used to be; times change, and manners with them; or perhaps whoever “keeps” them spends little on them and is no longer so anxious to show them off; displayed to that extent, they are like out-of-season fruits. . . . There had been occasions when one of them had been encountered, in the drawing-room-workroom-shop, by a great lady or a *dévote*, or even a priest; the latter seeking the vestments of the spirit, the former those of the fragile body—which, in order to emphasize ever more clearly its infinite fragility, she insisted must themselves be excessively fragile, not to say transparent. When such a circumstance arose Teresa remained impulsive, mistress of the situation, never losing her clear point of view—the best interest of her own business. But Carolina, on these extraordinary occasions, would wriggle without ceasing, as if the other people were there simply in order to admire her. The great lady, at this unusual contact, became evasive, aloof, absent-minded, and above all shortsighted, with a shortsightedness so acute that she was unable to distinguish the little thing close to her which was the other client. The *dévote*, on the other hand, immediately closed up, as a hedgehog does at the slightest sound, turning into a ball of prickles; then she vanished. And the priest, thinking perhaps that the Lord would one day touch her heart, had foreseen that disturbing event and gazed at her with benevolence.

There were certain encounters which formed a special chapter in the history of our two sisters. But the most important chapter

of all was a journey to Rome which was, in its time, so great an event that it turned the whole countryside upside down: the whole population of Santa Maria went on talking about it for many months.

Having executed a chasuble for a cardinal of the Papal Curia which had been warmly admired even in the antechambers of His Holiness, the two sisters were informed, through the agency of the Cardinal Archbishop of Florence, that the Holy Father would receive them in private audience with a group of a few other persons.

This piece of news caused an upheaval throughout the neighbourhood. From the parish priest to the last parishioner, they all came running to the glass door where the two women were busy working, their heads full of their journey. "The Materassis are going to Rome! To be received by the Pope!" Everyone wanted to know if it *was* true, if they were really going, and when; but, above all, what they were going to wear, for everyone knew that, in order to be admitted into the presence of the Pontiff, special clothes were required.

During those days even the strong-minded Teresa lost the tranquillity she had so stubbornly acquired and maintained. Carolina had fits of weeping and, almost, of fear. She felt that at the last moment her legs would not support her, and that she would arrive in Rome merely to collapse. She suffered from strange fancies, she lost her sleep, her appetite, even her wish to work. To relieve this excessive excitement they decided to take a gift to the Pope, a magnificent stole, at which they worked together day and night, without leaving it for a moment, melting with emotion, during the whole of the month before their departure.

Carolina drew out the design, of an austere, classical beauty, culminating, on the right-hand side, in a Christ on the Cross, and on the left in a Saint Peter in the act of consecrating the Host.

For a month women of all types in the neighbourhood talked of nothing but the stole and the visit to the Pope. Would they

manage to finish it even by working all day and a good part of the night? How would the figure of Christ turn out? And the blood of His wounds? And the most difficult thing of all—the face of Saint Peter as he held the Host breast-high in the divine moment? It was as though they all had to carry out the work themselves.

This stole might be called—and quite rightly—the sisters' masterpiece.

Owing to the extreme nervous strain, Carolina lost more than six pounds in a month; and when, the Christ being finished and also, on the other side, the Saint with large bright eyes gazing up to heaven, she, with her own hands, executed the Host—which, being a plain white disc, might well have weighed down the figure standing firm and still behind it—she herself took on an incorporeal lightness as she drew the thread to and fro, so that the Host took shape with the softness of rising vapour.

Accompanied by a prelate from Florence and ten or twelve other pious women, one June morning with the sun blazing in a sky of thick, monotonous blue, trembling like frightened doves as they rocked from side to side in a cab that jolted over the cobbles of the square as over the bed of a river, dressed in black with veils pulled down over their foreheads, they approached, abashed, the apostolic palace; and the nearer they approached the more they felt themselves being swallowed up in the majestic jaws of that sacred pile.

They were ushered in with another group, also accompanied by a prelate, and at the same time as an unaccompanied group of priests. Not more than fifty in all. They were shown into the Sala delle Benedizioni, and there they waited for the door to open from which the Pontiff would appear—a door at which every one of them stared without daring to breathe.

Suddenly the door opened—so quietly that it might have been made of cardboard—and a shaft of light poured through from the other room, which was filled with sunshine. In that shaft of light, and with the lightness that Carolina had contrived to give

to the Host between Saint Peter's fingers, His Holiness appeared. It was Pius X, and this was the June that preceded the conflagration in Europe; a few weeks later that compassionate heart ceased to beat. The saintly old man, dressed in white, with a tuft of silver hair coming out from beneath his cap and his pink face smiling with fatherly love, began passing in front of his visitors, one by one, as they knelt in a semicircle, saying a few words to each and giving them the supreme earthly benediction. When the prelate said that these were the two embroiderers from Florence and spoke of the stole they had brought as a gift to His Holiness, he took their hands tenderly in his and looked at them, saying to them both: "Well done, well done." The poor creatures, on their knees, could only weep, but at last Teresa, though broken by sobs, found the strength to utter, and as the Holy Father, after touching her brow, was giving her the apostolic blessing, she burst out: "For the soul of our father! For the soul of our mother!" And the Pontiff, with a further smile, nodded his head, while she, the ice once broken, hastened to add: "For our sister at Ancona! For the other one at Florence! For all the people who live in our village!" And all the time the Pontiff was nodding his assent to show that the blessing was for them too. Carolina, who had been quite incapable of opening her mouth but who had listened in great wonder to all that her sister had managed to ask, when at last she did open it, exploded with: "Niobe!" At which the Pontiff, smiling more openly, to the point of displaying his red and entirely toothless gums, took Carolina's face between his hands, as one does with a child, and said to her before he passed on: "For all, for all of them."

They were fifty years old at the time when this story begins—which, to be precise, was in the year 1918. Having reached the highest possible point in their profession and the fulfilment of every aspiration, whether secret or confessed, having re-entered, some years before, into complete possession of their property, whose revenues would have sufficed to provide them with a life

of comfort, they still went on working with the feverishness of sadder times, and, since they never even looked forward to a different kind of life, it seemed as though they never noticed the miracle that their hands had accomplished, and that the recovery of serenity and a legitimate position could not be their aim. They had reached the point of accumulating money without noticing it, without being aware of its value or feeling any passion for it, whether it came from their work or from their revenues, of which they spent nothing. It might now have been said of them that they were dragged helplessly along, bound to work's chariot and unable to free themselves—an idea which would never have occurred to them, just as it had never occurred to them to free themselves from their present way of living, to slow down its rhythm and enjoy a moment of repose, of comfort, of happiness, to allow themselves an excursion or an entertainment, to travel a little, to work less intensely, less urgently: the hardness of that work was its very essence, the means had become the end. If such a thought had flashed across their minds they would have felt themselves on the edge of a precipice, they would, for the first time, have been conscious of unhappiness, and, as if their mission in life were over, would have been left, as the saying is, with a handful of flies.

All their life was there, in that room already described, in the chaos of pieces of cloth and silk and muslin, in the ribbons and bits of linen, in the embroidery frames, the boxes, the scissors and the needles; in the lordly motorcars that drew up at the door, in the visits from rich, important people, in their recommendations and their prayers to be served. Tirelessly they maintained their course; indeed they increased rather than slackened its speed. This was their aim, in which they had forgotten the world, had forgotten to be women. They were two girls turned into stone, of whose femininity only the expert observer could detect the traces, the rare, faint gleams springing like will-o'-the-wisps from the ashes and vanishing beneath them again as soon as their pallid and misleading appearances were over.

They had a younger sister who lived with them—Giselda, their junior by fourteen or fifteen years, who had lived the drama of her own life the other way round. Of the four sisters, she had been the prettiest—almost beautiful, in fact; she had never known the family drama during the dark period of disorder, for she had then been too young to share in its troubles and had blossomed out into life when her sisters, left alone, had already started triumphantly on the reconstruction of their existence. She had never been trained to any work in a practical way, for her sisters had preferred to take no pains with her rather than to lose time from their own work; nor did they ask her help even when they felt themselves to be overburdened, either because they were not satisfied with what she was able to do, or because they liked to feel themselves all-powerful. They smiled in a good-natured way at her lack of skill, demanding of her nothing but light and leisurely tasks: to go into Florence and carry out commissions and do shopping; to take parcels or messages to suppliers and clients, and to deliver the finished work; all of which things Giselda performed extremely well, being frank and lively and intelligent. Nor did they show any jealousy of her youth and attractiveness, which were obvious to all, since they had always looked upon her more as a daughter than a sister and were proud of this feeling and of their own generosity towards her. Until something happened—unforeseen by these beings who were exiled from life, and yet perfectly natural—which, in one moment, changed these affectionate feelings into jealousy and mistrust.

Giselda was twenty, and at the height of her youthful exuberance, when she announced one day to her sisters that she was engaged and wished to get married. They raised their heads from their embroidery frames and, before looking at her, looked at each other in astonishment and perplexity, as completely confused as if the most improbable and, in fact, the least pleasant possible piece of news had been given to them. She was engaged to a young man belonging to high society, she said, rich, handsome, and elegant; and he would be coming to the house to ask

her family officially for her hand. This piece of news, announced by the girl with a certain triumphant, challenging pride, succeeded in creating a barrier of ice between the three women: and it sowed the seed of a rivalry that was destined to bear fruit and to go on living forever. And when Giselda, with her woman's instinct, discovered the ill-concealed rancour in the minds of her sisters, instead of soothing them by behaving in a docile fashion, belittling the matter in their eyes by showing it to be wrapped up in fears and uncertainties, acknowledging her own weakness and asking for their counsel and protection, she assumed the tone of assurance and superiority that her victory gave her. So that, since the feelings of the one served to exacerbate those of the other two, and theirs, in turn, exacerbated hers, dissension and discord finally burst forth when it became known that the young man in question—rich, handsome, elegant, and belonging to high society—was the most unlikely kind of person to make a success of marriage or lay the foundations of a family. He was, in fact, a bad character and had already given the most convincing proofs of it; he was dissolute, overbearing, incapable of honest work, he had always led the life of an unscrupulous libertine, and matrimony, for him, could be nothing more nor less than a new adventure. Bad accounts of him came to them from every direction. But, as we have already stated, feelings were ill-adjusted between the three women, and when her two sisters, putting aside that feminine rancour which they dared not admit, tried, openheartedly, to persuade her in her own interest against the step she was taking—shielding themselves by speaking of the miseries of which they had been, since their childhood, both witnesses and victims, since fate had given them, also, a bad father—Giselda took their loving advice for jealousy pure and simple, a jealousy that sought to hide itself beneath the cloak of foresight and wisdom and then emerge triumphant, and for the deep-lurking hatred of old maids towards a fortunate young girl. Besides, this fiancé of hers was not in the same position as their father, who for so long had had a determined parent to encourage his dissoluteness as a point of

honour, a parent who had then left him a considerable substance to squander: in this case the family, after endless struggles and distresses, had abandoned him to his fate.

So Giselda was married; and five years later, after the marriage which had given her a few months' happiness had quickly turned out to be all that prophecy had foretold, after she had endured every kind of humiliation, discomfort, and bitterness, including hunger, before she surrendered, she came, with pride humbled and throat convulsed with pain, and opened her heart to her sisters; and as they received her confidences, gradually, through them, all rancour was dissolved. Strong and happy they hated her; but now she was afflicted and defeated they were kind to her again, they gave her back their affection and their generosity.

After five years of struggle and suffering Giselda had craved asylum again from her sisters, and she came back under their roof for good, while her husband disappeared entirely from the town, leaving no traces. The woman who, in that troubled and gloomy house, had been for twenty years the embodiment of gaiety and happiness, was now the representative of sorrow. After she came back there, she had become sombre and silent, thin, her face worn and faded; she had lost all her grace and colour, all her looks, and it was as though she were cherishing not so much her own private disappointment and discomfiture as a love turned to hatred towards the man by whom she had been degraded and cast out. She had become hard, her lips never smiled but in bitterness or irony, and she was unable to conceal her envy of her sisters who had been so victoriously right and with whom she had returned to live ten years before. She lived with them now not as one of the mistresses of the house, for everything belonged to them, nor, as in the old days, by right of her gaiety and cheerfulness; nor, on the other hand, was it as a servant, for they treated her extremely well and with great respect, and if they asked her to do something the request was made in the most urbane and courteous form—a thing which gave the greatest possible humiliation to her downtrodden pride. Her position was a false one; the

whole tone of her life, the very way she moved and spoke, was false: she was a jarring, out-of-place creature, incapable of building up a new life for herself or of earning a crust of bread by hard work.

On the other hand, Teresa and Carolina, in their feelings towards her now that she was poor and defeated, had forgotten that she had once been desired by a handsome, adventurous young man of the kind that all girls, at all ages, see in their dreams and fantasies by night, whether with open or closed eyes (a piece of news which had brought no pleasure with it at the time); whom she, by a false reckoning, had believed she could make her own, herself becoming his, for all time, and whom she had wanted in spite of everybody, in spite of all that she heard about him and all that people foretold. The disaster that overtook her had served to mitigate the harshness of all this ill feeling, as, to an even greater extent, did their knowledge of what the unfortunate woman must have endured before she gave in, before she found the courage to open her heart, having no courage left to go on suffering. She had reached a state of resignation and hatred which was betrayed, unmistakably, by her pale, tight-closed lips.

She acted as superintendent of the house property; her own difficult position and her bitterness were providential qualifications for a superintendent without weaknesses, one who would yield as little as possible to requests for the deferment of their humble rent payments by the less fortunate of the tenants or those who, often, were harassed by disaster or sickness; and who would also refuse to take steps for the upkeep and repairs which such people all too easily demanded. She superintended the sisters' affairs also in connection with their distinguished clients—not always so distinguished when it came to a question of payment. And she superintended the farm: peasants, as is well known, require good, shrewd management, for the advantage of both sides; she kept the accounts for the milk, and for the vegetables which were sent, almost every morning, to market in Florence; for on this farm, produce of this type counted infinitely more

than crops, which amounted merely to a little corn and wine—the latter a poor wine of the plains, far from potent, not to say feeble. Upon all these people, who represented the power of her benefactresses and employers, Giselda vented the ill-humour that she secretly cherished against the latter, being unable to vent it directly, for her two sisters, in their complete and tranquil security, would have laughed heartily at it, thus humiliating her even further; and without themselves noticing it, they were secretly laughing at her all the time, unconsciously, for this ill-humour was all in their interest. She went to Florence to do the shopping and other necessary commissions, just as she had always done as a girl, thus making it possible for them never to move for one moment, for any reason whatever. But with what a different spirit, poor creature, did she now pass through the streets of the city! She did not even dare think of her not so distant girlhood, which seemed to her as infinitely remote as if she had been a decrepit old woman; otherwise she would have felt bitter to the point of agony. At home she did the less heavy jobs; she did the rooms, her own and her sisters', on the first floor, and kept all that floor tidy; and on the ground floor she was responsible for the reception room where the ladies were brought for their fittings; but she never sat working in the entrance, and when work was completed she did not even help with the ironing; the others were perfectly capable of rising an hour before dawn and going to bed after midnight in order to carry out, with their own hands, this delicate task which they considered to be of supreme importance: it was as though she were forbidden by some higher decree to have any part whatsoever in the work. As a worker they despised her, and she on her side, though unwilling to show it, despised the work by which she saw them brutalized and of which, for lack of a better cause, they had made a religion.

For the rough work there was Niobe, the old servant whose name had been forgotten, in the confusion, at the Vatican, and for whom the Pope had had a special smile and a special blessing. She was only old in a manner of speaking, for she was of the

same age as her mistresses, in whose service she had been for twenty years; but since she had now renounced every kind of personal desire, her fifty years might very well have been changed to at least sixty.

Niobe was good and cheerful, and her mouth, though a number of teeth were missing from it, was always smiling. Her hair was grey and scanty and was pulled back on the top and sides of her head in a manner that some hard-working women adopt because they cannot imagine anything simpler. Small and stumpy, she had grown fat and almost shapeless with the years, and her rotundities quivered ponderously but without causing strain or obstruction in her movements. There was no word, deed, or ill-humour that could offend her, and she bowed her shoulders like a good donkey, knowing that she was made for carrying burdens; and indeed she carried them without complaint or any sign of revolt or weariness. The sisters, though they treated her with condescension because of her physical disadvantages and her passive goodness, in their hearts had a real affection for her.

Niobe, too, had an unusual story, of which the world knew only a part; not because it was on a disproportionate scale, for it was an extremely natural drama, but because her mistresses so wished it, and she, falling in with their wishes, had on her side shown herself grateful to them for thus condoning her fault—a condonation which they proceeded to make use of as a sort of affectionate family blackmail, levied by means of a cough, or a slight smile, or some interjection into the conversation which she alone of those present could understand. And she, really and truly, disgraced though she might be, would smile more at their ingenuousness than at her own misdeeds, for she was not in the least displeased at being blackmailed and was perfectly ready, if they had wished it, to flourish the rest of the story in their faces.

In her village in the Valdarno poor Niobe, daughter of extremely poor people and compelled to live with labourers or as a servant in order to earn her bread, had been deceived (this, too, in a manner of speaking) at the age of fifteen, and put in the

family way, by a bailiff who was married and no longer very young. Later, after the matter had been hushed up, Niobe was sent into service in Florence. Hushing up, in this case, meant talking about it in a whisper until indignation was heightened and curiosity, at last, exhausted—a process which, in some places, takes a considerable time, since there is nothing else to substitute for it—and with a relish a thousand times greater than if spoken of openly, in the way that dull or tiresome things are talked about. This was the part of the story which everybody knew and for which everybody gave her complete absolution, with added insults and injuries against the satyr, the brute, the vile man who had abused an ignorant and innocent creature. The other part, however, which was known to nobody in the village except the Materassi sisters—it was unknown even to Giselda, who, for her part, was indifferent to Niobe's doings to an extent that the two old maids could not have imagined—was that, once established in Florence and proceeding from one house to another in a sort of servant girl's *Odyssey*, when she was about twenty-three years old, Niobe's bosom began to change its dimensions again, as it had done eight years before, in the village, for rustic reasons, so now for urban reasons—or *inurbane*, if you prefer—reasons, anyhow, which remained hidden in discreet darkness, as we too prefer to leave them. For the sake of family respectability this second lapse had to be kept secret, since the village, which had poured out indulgence and charity in abundance upon the fifteen-year-old, would conduct itself in a very different fashion if confronted with a second fall; for nobody could allow Niobe an "encore" when by now she was well versed in the mysteries of life and had reached a perfectly responsible age. Not only that; but, as is easily understandable, it would relieve the first seducer of much of the responsibility that had been laid upon him, and, though no one had ever seen any sign of it, it was he who should still be suffering ostracism and the flow of contumely.

The real truth was as follows. This simple, awkward, poverty-stricken creature had received at the hands of nature a strong

measure of sensuality, which had been aroused early and had then remained alive beneath the ashes. Having gone all to pieces before her time in the squalor and toil of servitude, easy prey of the male with her glance in which desire still shone nakedly, she now revealed to the expert observer that her physical decay, her kindliness, and a foundation of natural good sense had brought her to the point of renunciation but not yet to the point of shutting her eyes; and the supreme, the one and only emotional outlet now left to this wicked sinner consisted in an ecstatic smile which she could never succeed in controlling, interrupted only by a half sigh, or an irrepressible cry, always the same: "What a handsome dark fellow, my goodness!"—when she caught sight of a strong, dark young man or heard him mentioned: for dark men, you see, had been her strong point . . . and also her weakness.

On hearing such an exclamation—which was greeted by Niobe's two mistresses with tolerance and amusement—Giselda, with a glance of fury and disgust at the servant, would scowl as a cold flood of ill-humour overwhelmed her. A "dark man" had cost her too many tears and too much humbling of her pride for her to hear such a one spoken of with liking and admiration. In any case, with poor Niobe, too, dark men had not behaved well; but she was incapable of cherishing bitterness against them, and her bright eyes, like roses peeping out from the ruins, gleamed hotly at the sight of them, or even at the mere memory.

Teresa would smile loftily, half modest and half playful, and Carolina, at this display of joy, would feel herself pierced by a strange languor which she would try to conceal, not knowing what it was—a languor which would run all through her from her throat downwards, causing her to wriggle and squirm. Even if she managed to disguise it, the poor creature could not succeed in concealing the course of its passage.

The two needlewomen never moved away from their arsenal, round which, at respectful and respective distances, everything else moved, like stars round the sun—the servant, the sister, and the inhabitants of the village who came to greet them and whom

they knew how to keep at an exact and noticeable distance, answering them without raising their heads from their embroidery frames, courteous and reserved like two queens on a throne. No one carrying a child on her shoulder dared to pass beyond the second of the steps leading up to the door, and there she would sit as though at the foot of an altar; and all the child was allowed to do was to wave its hands, at which the mother, as if in church, would enjoin silence and obedience. The sisters did not at all dislike their neighbours coming, in this way, to their door, for they behaved in a deferential manner and brought them information on a number of small matters that served to keep them cheerful without distracting them—tasty morsels of news, the first fruits of the season, concerning love affairs on the horizon or at their zenith, knots tying or untying themselves, betrothals anticipating their normal conclusion by large advance withdrawals of capital and becoming, with the passage of a few months, impossible to conceal—pieces of gossip which the sisters would pretend to cut short in a dignified manner after they had been informed of every detail. Daughters-in-law aired their grievances against their mothers-in-law, and the latter did not spare the poisoned arrows they aimed at the former. Between contesting parties, the sisters would at once take up the position of peacemakers; with feigned unconcern they would take note of long absences or too rare visits; they would enquire whether such-and-such a woman was ill, or did not feel well, and why it was that she had not been seen for such a long time. Now and then, at the door on the right, in the shadow at the back of the room, Niobe would appear (this was her habitual post), and there she would stand listening, commenting with a smile without taking part in the conversation, or asking for news, confirming a tale, adding a detail of her own and giving judgment in that tone of easy tolerance which came so natural to her: "Don't be angry, life is short. . . ." At which the sisters, raising their heads simultaneously, would exchange a glance of understanding: "In her time she was just a little too tolerant, and she came

to know very well what life was like." But, apart from these moments of jest, the two women, while they were at work, appeared to have no sex at all, and the things that happened to other people seemed to belong to a different world about which one talked and joked in a detached and disinterested way. Their judgments and observations were always generous and indulgent without a shadow of complicity, issuing, as they did, from lips that remained severe. So much so, indeed, that they were held by everyone—with good reason and without exception—to be women of legendary, almost unbelievable virtue.

And if, while some village woman stood talking there, the sound of a car stopping was heard, the humble visitor would vanish like mist before the sun; and if she had not time to escape, she would clutch her baby to her breast and flatten herself against the wall of the house, bowing obsequiously as the illustrious visitor walked past. The ladies, twittering together, would laughingly respond to this meek homage.

To see them as real women, you had to come upon them by surprise away from their work and from that room which had withered them up. And this was very difficult because, although they were religious, they only half observed the repose of Sunday.

On Sunday mornings, wearing shawls over their heads and indoor clothes beneath black cloaks, as soon as the second bell sounded they bustled off to early Mass, whatever the season was; then they stayed working till past one o'clock, until Niobe came and summoned them to table. When they had finished their meal, which was consumed in a leisurely manner unknown on other days, they went and shut themselves up in their bedroom, and there—though they were no longer aware of it—they devoted the entire afternoon to the re-exhumation of their femininity.

They began by making a careful toilet, an operation which, on other mornings, was apt to be neglected or performed in too much of a hurry; then came the change of linen—linen of a cloistral austerity which Niobe laid out for them on the two sides

of the big bed, linen which was made for them outside, by a rough working woman to whom they never suggested any models to copy and with whose execution they never found the slightest fault, considering, in fact, that her sewing was extremely good; for they did not know what it was to make chemises for themselves, nor had it ever occurred to them to adorn their own bodies with the refinements of their art. At such a thought, perhaps, they would have piously crossed themselves—as though that were another world, the world of the soul, which had nothing at all to do with bodies.

Hearing them talk to each other as they performed certain duties, you would have thought that they were two different women, not the two women of the big room encumbered with pieces of cloth and embroidery frames on the floor below, and that their harmonious relationship had come to an end; you would have heard them quarrelsome and no longer cordial to each other; no longer giving way, without reserve, but prepared to stand up to each other, prepared to be critical, too, and ironical, and perhaps even cruel; each bringing her own individuality to bear upon the other: so that you would quietly come to the conclusion that, once parted from their work, these exemplary, exceptional, strong-minded, virtuous, constructive women, who for their common interest had given a shining example of perfect fusion, must have succumbed to the fate of all other sisters upon this earth, being far from condescending and submissive, but, on the other hand, rebellious, spiteful, envious, insolent, peevish, livid with jealousy of each other, and yet, with all this, extremely devoted and sisters in spite of everything.

I do not know whether as many statements have been made in defence of this degree of relationship as have been made about others; I hope not and I do not think so—not for the practical reason that it would leave me a little free space to attempt one as a matter of duty, but because in many cases the writer has allowed current opinion to get the upper hand of him to such an extent that it has then become necessary to undertake the ungrateful

task of putting things back in their place, and even of exaggerating in the other direction; if, on the other hand, the field is unencumbered one can breathe freely and go on serenely with one's work.

Having completed their toilet, one in one corner, one in the other, of the low, spacious room—which had once belonged to their grandparents and had been handed over to them as girls after their death, and in which stood an enormous square double bed on four walnut columns, about which hung a kind of chastity or, I should even dare to say, a kind of sanctity—they would then begin opening the wardrobe and the chest of drawers, obviously annoyed at having to come into contact over these operations, especially over the chest of drawers in which each of them had two drawers; and since Carolina had the two lower ones, she showed her annoyance at this inferiority in no uncertain manner. Or, if one of them went there and found the other one's drawer open and obstructing her way, she would shut it again brusquely, almost angrily, slamming it with no pretence at civility.

Were these the same women who, in the room on the ground floor, seemed to be but one single creature? Who hung on each other's lips? Who helped each other in turn? Who were continually making offers, anticipating each other, rendering each other mutual services? Even to the point of searching for a needle or some thread, or picking up a reel? Zealously assisting each other to find something that was lost, maintaining the devotion necessary for common victory? What was their real feeling—the one that they expressed in the arsenal of their profession, or the one that was visible in other places, in the rare intervals when they turned into two ordinary women?

From the wardrobe and the chest of drawers they would begin pulling out and putting back things of almost mythological interest—dresses of bygone years, scarves, bows, veils, little collars and capes that they had worn as girls or that had belonged to their mother or grandmother forty or sixty years before, having been part of their bridal trousseaux; or that had come to be there

by other, unknown means. Jackets with trimmings of sequins, plush boleros, hairpins and combs whose origin they did not, in their absent-mindedness, remember, remote as it was. Things that no one else in the world would have dared to wear, but that assumed decisive importance the moment they used them for their own adornment; for they embellished themselves with them as though they were expensive objects in the latest fashion, capable of sending anyone into ecstasies. All of which made it perfectly clear that they were outside normal life—and not only that, but outside time as well.

After they had decorated their waists and necks with bows, their bosoms with some other piece of old rubbish, their heads with hairpins and gleaming combs, they started to powder their faces, quarrelling as they did so, as though they did it out of spite towards anyone who whitened her face better and more thoroughly; and once they were well floured, like fish ready for frying, after making a thousand grimaces and pirouettes in front of the looking glass and inspecting, from every angle, the faces and figures which they had not seen for a week, they took up their positions at the window with elbows touching and arms carefully arranged on the sill.

What was the subject of their conversations? With any other pair of old maids it would be easy to guess, but with these two, who could say? Well, though you may not believe it, the enigma is again easy to solve, for in this case, too, the subject was love. This bedroom window of theirs was the only one in the house that looked on to the road, a road, as we already know, that led in a short distance to smiling and attractive hills such as those of thickly populated Settignano, or remote ones like that of Vinci-gliata, which is not built over either with houses or villas and where, all round the castle, there is an extensive wood belonging to it, with dry, mountain vegetation growing in the stony ground and amongst the rocks; this is all open to the passer-by, and hospitable, too, owing to the endless intricacies of the ground and especially to the quarries, both those in disuse and those in work-

ing order, which are so propitious to love and its interminable sweets. So that on Sundays there was a procession, along this road and beneath the window of the two sisters, of couples of all kinds making their way in that direction, some of them uncertain and filled with trepidation, others assured and urged on only by desire. It must not be thought that these numerous couples were all composed of young and beautiful, or at any rate fresh-looking, creatures, carrying round with them the overflowing exuberance of twenty, so rich in joy that it runs over and scatters itself without noticing wherever it passes; there were couples of every type and complexion and of every age, and sometimes of such odd shapes and sizes that they aroused in the beholder nothing but a measure of tolerance and a good deal of amusement, since love, of whatever species, is never sad.

At that window they stayed until twilight and even later, dallying there, unable to tear themselves away, talking of a nonexistent amorous past which they inflated to the point of absurdity, inspired and urged on by the sight of the passing couples, and rivaling each other in exploiting this imaginary love life. It was nonexistent, it must be understood, not because they had been universally rebuffed or because no one had ever desired them; they were no uglier than a great many other women who find husbands, and, considering their position and their highly remunerative work, they could both of them have made a match, even at fifty; it was their complete abstraction that had caused them to remain old maids, for they had built up their pride and prestige on a different foundation. It was entirely their own fault—not, as Giselda malignantly whispered, that not even the devil had wanted them; it was their fault and that of their special position, since they would never have accepted a poor man, and a gentleman would never have accepted *them*; without knowing it, they had placed themselves out of the running, and no man had approached them because of this lack of balance in their ideas, because of their rigidity, their unresponsiveness, their inattention; and because no man would have known how to begin,

how to displace their interest and attract it towards himself, certain as he was to make no impression upon them, since either they would not have paid him any attention, having no time to stop and listen, or, if brought down to earth, would have simply shrugged their shoulders. The thing had not happened because it was not meant to happen; they had arranged matters in such a way that the thought of marrying them had never crossed anyone's mind, just as though they were not women at all.

And the strangest part of it was that they used to utter masculine names one on top of the other: Guglielmo, Gaetano, Giuseppe, Raffaele—as though they wanted by this means to wear each other down, to establish incontestable evidence and superiority, to put the other one out of court.

Teresa used always to talk about a lawyer's son who had come to the neighbourhood for a holiday thirty years before and who had later become the best lawyer in Florence. Also of another man who had started, with great success, an industry for the manufacture of household utensils which had become extremely famous, he himself growing rich and important. And of yet a third, who had emigrated to America and made millions. She went on to give particulars confirming the possibility that she might have become the wife of any one of these men, furnishing details and explanations, stating the exact reasons why the marriage had not come off, as though it had been stopped on the very eve of the wedding day, and always concluding with the statement that she herself had been entirely and solely responsible for the change of plan.

Carolina, in the stories she told, showed herself to be obsessed with the brutality of the male; and this image, with increasing distance and remoteness, became more and more magnified in her virginal imagination, until she would grow nervous and upset at the mere thought of it, as if these things that had never really happened had happened only the day before. Having refused herself, after a fierce struggle, to the son of a doctor, the latter had waylaid her one evening and had seized her roughly

by the hair and thrown her down against a hedge in a violent access of desire. She would tell how she had escaped by a miracle from the madman's embrace, and had then fallen in a dead faint and lain there, prostrated by shock, the entire night, bruised and pierced by thorns like Our Lord. She described the exact spot where this brutal assault and violent struggle had taken place, together with the day and the hour. Not a word of it was true. From a normal conversation her imagination, with the passing of so many Sundays, had brought matters to the point of creating a regular deed of violence, a positive act of banditry, her own martyrdom—and with the tendency to lay it on ever more thickly. In the same way, no doubt, her sister's accounts of resounding successes in professional and industrial circles had grown and steadily increased by the adding of one detail to another, as in a work of art.

The one who was listening, knowing that the other's remarks bore no relation to truth or were at any rate grossly exaggerated, would remain indifferent to the tale that was being told, receiving it coldly, evasively; taking great care not to bring it down to its true level, so as not to compromise the cause of her own imaginative efforts; and as she listened, her lips would assume a grimace of disgust, as though the other were describing things that were dirty or evil-smelling.

And so there passed through their conversations beings who were little less than imaginary and who had become closely familiar—hypothetical people who had stayed in the neighbourhood for their holidays, people whom they scarcely knew, of formidable talent and energy, strong and enterprising or brutal and savage, people who had vanished ten or twenty years ago, all of them directed towards some colossal success or finishing up in some bestial act. Feelings, aspirations, tender desires—none of these were satisfying unless they led to such conclusions.

In the end Carolina, as a sort of final number, would recall that, at the time when she was about to be married to a young man of good, kind appearance, with the full approval of everybody, a

friend of the family had come running to her mother, at the last moment, to inform her that the chosen young man suffered from a very serious defect, of the kind that made it the duty of a good citizen to forewarn the family, or, failing that, the Church. The Church terms such defects "canonical impediments"; and this is the reason why it publishes the banns three Sundays running, and every parishioner who knows something must speak up clearly, for the good success of the marriage. It was a defect of a kind that cannot be mentioned, but which could not really be altogether mournful since all the men in the neighbourhood ended up by laughing at it, and many of the women too, the oldest and most knowing ones. A defect which caused conversations to begin with mysterious hints and end in peals of laughter, and which made it impossible for the poor young man to take a wife. Even this tale did not really amount to anything. The man in question had existed in the neighbourhood twenty-five years before, and the local people had whispered and laughed about him in this way, with how much foundation it is hard to tell; but he had never had even the vaguest relationship with Carolina, though she may have known him in the way she knew everybody else; it was her own imagination which led her on to consider herself his victim and to believe that she had, by a miracle, escaped a fatal embrace.

Her sister would let her go on talking; then, instead of maintaining a cold, evasive silence, would gradually begin taking part in the story, nodding her head and encouraging the other to proceed with her description. Yes, indeed, if her sister were to get a man, that was just the one for her; *that* one she could have, she seemed to concede; yes, yes, indeed—and let's hope he'll give her a good thrashing.

The truth of the matter was that both of them knew men only by hearsay—and by the vaguest and remotest hearsay, at that. It would not have been easy, I imagine, to find two other women who knew less about them.

The young couples went past hugging each other closely, as

though from cold, though in truth they were boiling hot; they hugged each other as though they could never get warm, even in the heat of summer. They all threw fleeting glances at the two women, who examined them, in return, with complete self-possession, finding, generally, that the females were ugly, unattractive, and badly dressed. On the other hand, they were indulgent towards the males and were always ready to appreciate the qualities of their figures or faces, of the way they walked, of their eyes, of course, and of their teeth, their hair, their voices, the breadth of their shoulders or the cut of their clothes. The thing that always remained inexplicable to them, a complete and absolute mystery, was how a handsome, or anyhow attractive, or anyhow elegant, young man could possibly have fallen in love with some affected, grimacing creature, or one like a dressed-up walking stick, or with a jaundiced expression, or a flattened-out mouth, or a figure like a clothes horse, or a nasty, spiteful face. "How in the world do they manage to fall in love with these people?" they concluded in unison. With the women they were pitiless. Even when they were pretty or charming, they always sought to find some dreadful defect in them, so that they might be crushed and diminished and reduced to dust: at the very least, they had to be nasty characters. And to think that they were forced to make chemises and drawers for such as these! And how beautifully they made them, with what inimitable fineness, exquisiteness, *chic*, forgetting all personal feelings and all envy! Otherwise they would have made them crooked, out of proportion, too tight, so as to make their wearers look ugly and clumsy and ridiculous.

"Beauty and the Beast, the other way round, of course."

"Where on earth did he pick up that old bundle of sticks?"

"What a face! *She'll* deceive him, you can see that."

"Those empty eyes would deceive Christ and all the Saints."

"Did you see what a chin she had?"

"She's so loose in the joints, she looks like a woolwinder."

"Her lips are big enough to make a whole meat pie."

"Did you see what awful-looking hands?"

"I expect she's a scullery maid."

And if it was impossible to demolish her because she really *was* charming: "Of course she's painted up to the eyes; wash her face and you'll see what's left."

"I should like to see her in the morning when she gets out of bed; what a sight she must be!"

It was a perpetual litany against the women but always a benevolent glance for the males, in whom, whether handsome or ugly, they never failed to find something to admire.

And the women as they walked past—all of them without exception—either restrained their laughter or, more often, did not restrain it but let it burst forth at the sight they saw; for truly it was difficult to look at them without laughing, seeing them there at the window, got up like that. Only the men, taken up with their own affairs, did not take any notice of them even if they looked at them, or, if forced to notice them, merely uttered the word "hags" as the sole sign of their transitory interest. Or they would think of them as a couple of old sillies pretending, at a respectable age, to be pretty and girlish; not knowing how much virtue and hard work had preceded their few hours of modest relaxation, their strange and melancholy return to femininity. But they, on their side, were so much taken up with themselves and their own pleasure as to be entirely unaware of this unfavourable criticism.

It was only their tenants who greeted them punctiliously, who came to pay their respects under their window, stopping for a few moments as they went out or came back again. They would reply from above, not, as on other days, without even looking at them, but bowing in their best society manner, as if they were two grand ladies in a box at the opera or the play, and full of chatter and jokes and gossip; and as their tenants had always seen them like that they no longer realized the queerness of their getup, or said the poor things were dressed like that because they didn't really know what they had got on, or, on the other

hand, what they *ought* to have on; and one or two of them recognized certain things which had been worn some decades earlier by their grandmother or their mother.

The oddest thing was that, above the window at which they sat, the wall did not end in a roof, as it does in all the houses in that neighbourhood, where the roofs give their character to the villages and towns, but in the horizontal line of a smooth, white parapet like that of the pretty little Arab houses of Tripoli or Benghazi—a most unusual thing indeed; and on this parapet stood two terra-cotta urns with agave plants in them—plants indestructible yet incapable of growing, decrepit yet immature—which made this Sunday-afternoon picture even more ridiculous and gave it a somewhat equivocal flavour.

At dawn on Monday, back in their workshop, with their big white aprons and their thick-lensed spectacles, all the amusements and delights of the day of rest utterly forgotten, they were two different women: not a ribbon nor an ornament upon them, nor even a memory of powder on their faces; it was as though they had been acting in a play.

That was their life, completely and absolutely, and to it they had given themselves wholly, cutting themselves off from the other, the real life; and it was that which had now become, for them, a play, with nothing real about it.

Who would have thought that women who were sensitive to the variations in feminine fashions of the highest standard—even if only in garments of secondary importance, though by no means of secondary fineness or difficulty of execution—who were capable of divining and understanding their most delicate subtleties, and who saw ladies parading in front of them in the most exquisite fashions of the moment, could have spent an afternoon at that window overlooking a country road, so fantastically decked out with finery that they looked like figures in fancy dress, and engaged in conversation so utterly remote from the realities with which they were intimately concerned?

There was another thing, an important one, from which the

poor things had shut themselves off without noticing it. Born and brought up in the open countryside, owners of a quite large and extremely fertile farm which they had bought back at a high price, they did not feel the slightest interest in the land or affection for it, in fact they considered all work in connection with it to be low and dirty: they despised it. This fault they had, to a great extent, inherited from their father, who, born well-off, son of a genuine countryman but attracted by the splendours of town life, had from his childhood despised the source of his wealth and been ashamed of it—even though they themselves, after the family fortune had ceased to be in the wise hands of their grandfather, had been able to recover it with exemplary rectitude. But perhaps we must once again lay the responsibility on the work which had absorbed all other possibilities and all energy, leaving nothing for the rest of life but shadow and unprofitableness.

Teresa considered any time taken in visiting or superintending her land to be ill-spent; and if Fellino, her peasant farmer, had to speak to her on business connected with the farm, she told him firmly to go to Giselda, because she herself could have nothing to do with it, she was too busy; whereas he, naturally, would have preferred to deal directly with his mistress.

Carolina never received any requests from Fellino, for he knew quite well that she would not even listen to him but would give him to understand by means of a tremendous wriggling, without speaking a single word, that she belonged to a world which was rather different from the world of cabbages and carrots, and that it was not the correct thing for him to worry her with such absurdities.

Furthermore, Giselda, in view of the things she superintended, had a wholly unsuitable character, coupled with a supreme lack of interest; arrangements were made suddenly, according to the days or the months, or rejected without discussion, without listening to reason, or postponed indefinitely without a why or a wherefore and with serious results; so that it was the peasant and the farm which were made to bear the burden of her ill-humour

and bitterness. Even if the world came to an end, there was no man capable of making her budge from her decision, though that decision might involve the most colossal, the most obvious blunder.

And there was another inconvenience that must be mentioned. The fact that the farm was cultivated mainly as a market garden necessitated a very frequent manuring of the soil, and the old land agent, when he had undertaken the building of two rows of living quarters behind his own house, had certainly thought—as of course would anyone—that fourteen families paying a rent, even a small one, would contribute, by the end of the year, a nice little sum which was not to be despised; but he had also thought, at the same time, of another thing which not everybody would have thought of, and that was that fourteen families of generally prolific stock would also pay a second rent without being aware of it, a rent that would flow through certain conduits and secret deposits which he had had the forethought to build and which it would not be delicate to name, a rent that would quickly be transformed, by way of cabbages and carrots, into sounding, shining wealth. He was a man of the soil and he spoke of certain things with guileless simplicity, without the slightest sign of wriggling, without crinkling up his nose or twisting his mouth as his son would have done, and later his granddaughters. So that, when Fellino had to spread all this bounty from on high along the furrows of the farm in the close neighbourhood of the house, he could never find a suitable time to do it, for his susceptible mistresses would fly into the wildest rage, asserting that at any moment ladies might arrive—duchesses, marchionesses, countesses, mitred priests, and kept women. Besides, they did not wish to smell the stink either, even though they did not belong to such exalted spheres. There was indeed no time that was suitable, for during the spring and summer, when there is a rage for garden produce, there is also a rage for chemises and drawers, and they were quite capable of coming down to start work at three in the morning, so that the unfortunate man, in order to

get the ground manured, had had to take his chance at the most absurd moments—by the light of the moon, or, on the sly, on a Sunday afternoon while his mistresses were at the window looking over the road, engaged in the display of their infinite graces. Until the stink reached their noses and they jumped to their feet, malignant, spitting poison, seriously endangering all the sequins and bows of their finery . . . But by that time Fellino had already done what he had to do.

The peasant had his own entrance gate in a side road, and woe betide if anything connected with him should pass through by the other way and arrive in front of his mistresses' part of the house, if any one of his household, by mistake or for any other reason, should make use of their gate, modest and neglected as it was, but nevertheless the gate through which ladies had to pass. The women of the tenement houses, on the other hand, were admitted to their presence, because of the need for a stage chorus, as it were—like walking-on figures in a play; in fact they clearly encouraged this habit, and would smile in a good-natured way, in token of apology, if some grand lady should arrive and cause them to run away; but the peasant women, like creatures of an inferior species, were forbidden to appear in front of the throne.

The sisters detested country smells, they moved disdainfully away from the sight of a fowl; indeed they would have nothing to do with hens, considering them immensely stupid, tiresome beyond words, unattractive, puerile in shape; of oxen they had an unreasoning terror, they looked upon a cart horse with contempt or pity, and considered the donkey to be an unmentionable, indecent animal.

When, on the day of the grape harvest towards the end of September, they made an appearance in the middle of the afternoon amongst the grape pickers (their tenants and others of his friends in the neighbourhood were invited by the peasant to help in this task), everyone ran to meet them, competing in affectionate salutations and marks of respect. They scarcely left the pathway, along which they proceeded with some difficulty, especially

Carolina; and if they stepped down from it to walk for a moment on the clods of earth, they were in danger of falling every instant and everyone had to walk with them and hold them up. They would drop a few bunches of grapes into the bottom of a basket, as a rite of plebeian character to which they deigned to stoop, and almost immediately, being quite incapable of supporting either themselves or the basket, which someone, following like a trainbearer in their wake, would offer to carry for them, they would wash their hands of the whole business and go back, with obvious relief, to their own realm, endlessly cleaning and recleaning the soil from their clothes and shoes, wiping off some bit of dirt, something disagreeable that had inevitably stuck to them, showing clearly that they did not wish to get mixed up in any troublesome, messy competitions, and taking refuge in the protecting bosom of Niobe, who was waiting for them with open arms as they returned from their uneasy expedition.

Nor did they ever accept the invitation to the dinner and evening party which take place after the grape harvest, at which the peasants, having eaten well and drunk well, give themselves up to simple, healthy gaiety spiced with salacious jokes and coarse repartee. With the excuse that they had to get up early in the morning, they did not appear at all. They were concerned, at all costs, to demonstrate that their own world had no connection whatever with that of the peasants, as though they had issued from the rib of a king.

Carolina, who in truth was incapable of walking over clods of earth, always ended by falling down and producing all round her a confusion of laughter and offers of assistance. And if she caught sight, from the path, of a ripe peach or fig hanging within reach, she would catch hold of it in a twinkling, and before picking it would hold it tightly for a few seconds, so that it looked as if she meant, not to feel it, but to squeeze it; thus revealing, not a desire to find out whether the fruit was ripe, but a curious excitement that she derived from such a contact, over which she liked to linger, half closing her eyes and abandoning herself to

the shock, or the secretion, that flowed from the fruit and permeated her whole body. Until at last, rousing herself from her momentary abstraction, she would decide to pick it and eat it, or, more readily, to throw it away, once she had picked it, with a laugh of distaste.

Having begun, quite correctly, by describing the energy and virtue and the hard work of these women, in such detail as I considered necessary in order to give you sufficient evidence of their character, I think it is right that you should now know something of their brief intervals, of their hours of respite, so curious and so rare, and at the same time of certain weaknesses that in no way obscure their virtues but, on the other hand, give a touch of humanity to creatures who, devoid of them, would cease to be either attractive or real and become arid, artificial, dull, and false.

There was one single day in the year upon which they abandoned their work, not by commandment, but for their own personal pleasure: and that was on the day of Saint Francis, in order to go to the fair at Fiesole.

They cherished a particular tenderness for the Saint of the poor and humble, and he was so vividly present in their thoughts that they felt he was alive and in the midst of them, and that they could love him without that instinctive feeling of awe, and often of terror, that most of the Saints inspire. He was the Saint of their hearts to whom they talked as if he were a friend or a brother, seeing him, as it were, at their side rather than far away on an altar. And Carolina, who had made full use of her gift to depict, in silk, the images of all the Saints, almost holding her breath from the exalted nature of her mission, when she portrayed the poor man of Assisi had remained all the time confident and smiling; and, as she saw him gradually issuing from her needle on to a piece of cloth innocent of gold or silver, had been moved to tears and, next moment, to laughter, well pleased with herself; and all the time she had talked, and had sung and made

jokes, and wept and laughed with him, holding him on her knee like a little boy.

At one o'clock, as on Sunday afternoons, they put down their work, ate a few mouthfuls in a haste that was positively youthful, and then dressed themselves in a rather less *recherché* manner than they did for sitting at the window, with fewer frills, but still in a lavish style, including, above all, something or other that bore no relation to current fashions. When the party had assembled (this was arranged beforehand with such of their more favoured tenants as were free and wished to go), with numbers of children, twenty or twenty-five persons in all, the good sisters started off up the slope towards the fair at the top of the hill, rather as if they were being pursued, or were pressing on to victory, thrusting forward into what, for them, was a real danger, completely inexpert as they were at walking on roads or amongst crowds of people.

Once they had arrived amongst the gay and noisy throng, they would stay for two hours, ecstatic, dazed, stupefied; amongst the barrowloads of spiced cakes and objects made of straw, the toys and the trinkets, the long rows of roast chickens on the bare ground, the din of bugles and pottery bells—there they would stand, incapable of uttering a syllable or even of answering if asked a question, simply gazing at everything with enchanted eyes, and allowing themselves to be overwhelmed by the confusion and the noise. There were no other two hours in the whole year when their personalities were hushed and subdued to this point, not even during Mass. At length, stunned by the uproar, jostled in the turmoil, they would start homewards in the twilight; gradually, as they left Fiesole behind, recovering the vivacity with which they had started out, which had been stifled by the splendours of the fair. Along the Maiano road, past the walls and gates of many villas, with a sickle-shaped moon or the last redness of a fine autumn sunset in the sky, shouting, laughing, singing louder and louder, the party, as it drew nearer the house,

increased its clamour, giving vent to the noise that had been suppressed by two hours of silence at Fiesole.

Limping with weariness, footsore, hustled along by friends and children who had now lost all awe of them and would suddenly seize them by the arms, pulling them about, hugging them, forcing them to run or to stop, and actually tumbling on top of them amid shouts and cries, like a game of catch-as-catch-can, enjoying this carefree hour, this freedom which put them on a level with everyone else and made the oracles into playthings, blowing the straw trumpets slung round their necks and ringing the cow-bells they had brought back to give to those who had stayed at home, the two sisters, in a last final effort, would arrive back at Santa Maria shouting, triumphant, dishevelled, intoxicated, while all the neighbours ran out to meet them.

Carolina had always lost something or other on the road—if it was only the heel of her shoe; or she would come back with her shoes torn and burst asunder. She would have lost a hook or an eye and her skirt would be almost falling down and she would have to hold it up with both hands; or she would have broken the loop that supported her stockings or her drawers, and everything would have come tumbling down unless she had clung tightly on to it.

Then they would throw themselves half fainting on to the sofa.

Since no legs in the world were less accustomed to walking than theirs, the strength which had so far sustained them suddenly left them once they had arrived, and a period of collapse followed. But Niobe, who stood waiting at the gate, knew the nature of her two chickens and was ready for all contingencies.

Once they were on the sofa, one leaning up against the other, like corpses retrieved from a flood or a battlefield or found under the ruins after an earthquake, she would throw herself at their feet and relieve them of their shoes, loosen their clothes at the neck and waist, and put her hands under their petticoats to make sure they were still warm; she would massage their limbs or apply lint to their wounds, would rub their wrists and temples;

the vinegar and camphor would come into action; until at last they began to give faint sighs, opening their eyes slowly as they felt themselves coming round—sighs which turned into groans as they came back to life and accepted a sip of water into which Niobe had poured a few drops of orange-flower essence. Then, very gradually, they would try to move: “Ah! Ah!”—every movement was a stabbing, piercing pain; they would try to rise and go upstairs to their bedroom: “Ah! Ah!”—as they staggered in all directions, their limbs out of joint, their legs dragging like those of mortally wounded animals.

In order to complete our examination, there is one last detail that I must add, which for me (I don't know about you) has a most engaging significance.

These women, who had made of work an iron discipline, their one reason for living, their very faith, abandoned that work, as we have seen, only on Sunday afternoons, in obedience to divine commandment, and for perhaps an hour, without enthusiasm, in order to be present on a solemn occasion like the grape harvest on their own farm; and only once a year, spontaneously, for half a day, in order to attend a traditional country festival, very famous throughout the whole neighbourhood, since Fiesole is the queen of the countryside—a festival to which they had always been taken, ever since their childhood, probably, by their father and mother and perhaps their grandfather. All these were fixed interludes, decided by the calendar, which did not do the slightest harm to their work and were suitably prepared and allowed for in advance, and carried out with the magnificence of a solemn ritual. But there was one other thing which, though it appeared perfectly natural and insignificant, caused them to drop their work and leave it hurriedly for a short period of—at the most—ten or fifteen minutes. It was just as though they were obeying an order, a call from outside, unknown but urgent as lightning, a call which could not be denied and which they obeyed with a decision not only surprising but savouring almost of rudeness and insolence or, at the very least, of the religious fervour we have

already seen; making them look like priests who have gone suddenly mad and who throw away those very objects that constitute the symbols of their faith. Just as one might abruptly leave a person who has bored one to the point of absurdity or whom one no longer loves, so did they leave the embroidery frames in front of which we have seen them sitting as if in front of an altar.

You must know that the lovely hills of Settignano and Vinci-gliata are used not only by lovers, for hiding places in their woods, but also by the regiments of the Florentine garrison for route-marching and training, sometimes in small groups, making little noise, sometimes in platoons or companies, with drums and a few bugles, and quite often in whole regiments, with a tremendous fanfare and the colonel, with his staff, at their head.

The first far-off sound of bugles was enough to arouse them, or, with ears as sharp as those of wild creatures, they would hear the beat of marching footsteps, or the nearer clamour of voices, or, more often, the first sounds of singing, for soldiers marching through the countryside always sing—patriotic songs, or nostalgic, sentimental airs, as though the expenditure of a second sort of energy would relieve fatigue; they sing because they are twenty years old and because they have so much power in their lungs and it has to come out somehow; and instead of expending it in two ways they could just as well expend it in three. And so our two sisters would never fail to leap to their feet and run to the iron gate, picking off and throwing aside, as they went, any threads that might be sticking to their aprons, or fragments of diaphanous material, straightening their waists and their necks, brushing back their hair, and continuing to subtract or add something or other to their figures until the very moment when the soldiers started marching past in front of them.

Carolina, putting down her embroidery frame, would run over to the pier glass in front of the console table, and there, palpitating all the time with impatience, would carry out a succession of movements designed to make her figure more elastic and willowy beneath her big apron.

It must be admitted that the infantry encountered in them a notable resistance, and, if they were not exactly indifferent, they looked the enemy straight in the face, with perfect coolness. All these men walking past them, a bit clumsy in their marching uniforms, weighed down by their equipment, and marching at ease in a rather listless fashion, left them completely in control of themselves and of their own glances, and they looked as if they might have been merely choosing a salad in a rather fastidious manner. Except when they saw some young lieutenant, well dressed and with an upright, athletic figure, they betrayed no excitement.

The situation became more complex when it was a case of a detachment of engineers consisting of young men of a higher social status, most of them townsmen—a fact which was at once obvious from their gait, from their way of looking or of smiling, and also of singing, from the kind of songs they sang, from the gracefulness of a gesture or of a gallant word to the women they passed, or of a kiss thrown to them, while their sharp, intelligent eyes criticized them with civilian self-possession.

But it was the passing of a cavalry or artillery regiment that provided the most interesting spectacle. The smartness and skill of the men on horseback, the massive look of those who rode on tanks or gun carriages, the vibration and the deafening noise they produced; the broad chests and square shoulders of the gunners and the quiet assurance of their appearance, resulting from their power over these machines of destruction—strapping young men, most of them, confident, virile, well built, slow of movement and spare of gesture: all these, even such as revealed country origins, exercised a strange power over the female spectators.

Teresa's eyes, at this bewildering sight, would seek out the higher ranks, using them as a standard of valuation, both as a woman and as an old maid, for the power of her own resources. She would gaze in ecstasy at a colonel, but at nothing less than a captain at the height of maturity and of such virile exuberance that her eyes were dazzled at one glance. Such solidity, such as-

surance, such an appearance of authority and of health attracted her violently. For she too was a strong and independent spirit, and the thought of feeling another source of energy at her side, not in order to surrender herself to it in a complacent or passive way, but to merge herself with it, for mutual understanding and esteem in a comradeship that reached the point of tenderness—this thought constrained her to clutch at something for support, at a bar of the iron gate, at the wall of the house.

Carolina, on the other hand, being more sensitive and delicate-minded, could not bear the sight of these hefty, red-faced men with their coarse, free-and-easy appearance, who displayed, as they gripped their horses' sides, huge thighs, massive as columns, and who had an air of authority and skill, but also, above all, a look of satiety which sent a shudder of terror right through her. Her eyes, drowning, clutched at their only life belt—the blue eyes, slightly veiled with melancholy, of some young lieutenant, or even, possibly, the burning black eyes of a bumptious sergeant, eyes begging for some gentleness on this earth and yearning with the need to find an outlet for his own gentleness, without stint and without calculation, since he too felt himself to be a vessel that was overflowing.

And since the sisters were joined at the gate by other women and girls from the tenement houses, the soldiers as they passed would cast playful or devouring glances at them, producing smiles and cries and laughter amongst the girls, quiet looks of satisfaction amongst the middle-aged married women, and cheerfulness amongst the old ones: they would shout compliments, jests, passionate or honied remarks and greetings, and would laughingly throw kisses, flaunting and flashing the whiteness of their teeth and causing devastation, gaiety, and confusion in the group of females; and all this with such generosity and abundance, true property of youth, as to make it seem that there were plenty of these good gifts of God for all of them, even for the ugly, even for the old.

Behind the bars of the gate, and not directly visible from the

road, the eyes of Niobe had rediscovered the ardour of their youth and were big and sparkling above the shapeless ruin of her figure; and she, for her part, had no preferences either of physical type or rank, nor did she hesitate to look them all in the face, from the first to the last; from the colonel to the last orderly, she liked them all, without reserve, nor could she refrain from a few personal expressions of appreciation, muttering all the time, without intermission: "What eyes! What sturdy figures! What strong hands! What shoulders! There's a handsome dark man for you, my goodness!"

Giselda did not join in watching the soldiers go by, and if it so happened that she was doing her morning cleaning in her sisters' room as they marched past, she would leave the room and bang the door so as not even to hear the sound of them, or would slam down the window with such violence that the glass nearly fell out into the street. "Ugly brutes!" she would exclaim with clenched teeth. And they, egged on by somebody withdrawing from the game even more than by those who joined in it unresistingly, would hurl after her a fusillade of shouts and allusions. "Criminals! The whole lot of them ought to be in prison," she would cry, without caring whether her own attitude of hostility was noticed by her sisters below, who were dumb with admiration, and about whom she would be muttering disgusted remarks to herself: "Silly old fools! Half-wits!" For one man who had treated her badly she had declared war on the whole sex. She was entirely devoid of the serene good nature of Niobe, who—if you considered them one by one and at any given moment—had been not too well treated by men, but who, when she remembered them *en masse*, felt that they had behaved extremely well to her. She would be filled with tenderness at the thought of them, would feel young again and prodigal of her own charms, and, at the bottom of her heart, her only regret was that they had not behaved even worse, that their ill-treatment had come to an end so soon, and that it could not begin again. Unafraid, she had preserved her love for them—a barren desire that never failed to

inspire her still youthful eyes with an expression of great joy and a flash of happiness as she saw them pass by.

When Teresa and Carolina went back into the house with Niobe, they would look at her and exchange a knowing smile—a smile for what everyone knew, and for what *they* knew and others did not know, but even more for what she alone knew; and this must have been the most important part of it, for, whereas the soldiers marching past were, for them, a mysterious, terrible species, *she* knew very well what kind of species they were.

CHAPTER III

Remo

SO the days went by for the two good sisters in their quiet village—if village it can be called—and in the old house which, by the power of their virtue, had again become a safe and tranquil refuge; until at last an event took place which had the effect of changing the rhythm and altering the course of their progress through life.

We remarked at the beginning of this tale that there were four sisters, of whom, so far, we have met only three: let us see, therefore, what became of the fourth, Augusta (third in order of age), whose story is neither so very long nor so very gay.

Even though she bore an auspicious name, her existence was humble and colourless. She grew up and blossomed forth in times of adversity, for she was six years younger than Teresa and five than Carolina; at their first opening, her eyes, unlike her sisters', beheld no cradle of roses, but signs of the already approaching storm in the overcast family firmament. Less intelligent than they, devoid of enterprise or ambition, without the beauty and vivacity of Giselda, who was to come afterwards, she passed unobserved amongst the others, adapting herself, from her youth upwards, to the drab life of a workwoman in a shoe factory, in the position of “finisher.” She had never cherished aspirations

with regard to her own life nor illusions about her own person, and she had married a railway worker, a good sort of chap, Roman by origin, with whom, not long after the wedding, she settled down at Ancona. And just as before, owing to the mildness of her character, she had passed unobserved in the bosom of her family, so, now that she was far away, she was almost entirely forgotten. It could not be supposed that a person who had never had need of anything could have need of anything now. Besides, her sisters knew that she was comfortably settled at Ancona and led a decent life there, plying her old trade of shoe finisher in her own home, in the intervals of her domestic tasks.

They wrote to each other twice a year, for Christmas and Easter —a few general, almost identical phrases typical of people who are not in the habit of writing to each other, in whom any sign of affection or expansiveness is cramped by the actual difficulties of writing for the inexpert, unless cheap rhetoric comes to the rescue with commonplaces and ready-made phrases foaming with emphasis or dripping with pious resignation and—though adapting themselves to the most improbable circumstances—bearing no relation at all to the real feelings of the writer. But poor Augusta was very far from appreciating the charm of words, and her letters can be easily summarized: "My dear sisters, I am writing to tell you that I have nothing special to say, but that for the present I am well and so are the others of my family who join with me in greeting you and wishing you a Happy Easter in the hopes that with the Lord's help this finds you as it leaves me." On certain occasions the Lord is never lacking; the word is a resource to fall back upon, and is to the sentence what the pole is to the vine; it is constantly dragged in, especially in any difficulty, even a small one, like that of scribbling a few syllables on a little piece of paper.

The sisters, on their side, answered in a very succinct manner, in letters of a page and a half; or, if they reached two pages, their contents became extremely costive and the words artificially spread out and enlarged towards the end.

They began by excusing themselves for their long silence, protesting their wish to write more often and at length but saying that they were always prevented by pressing business, and putting the blame for this brevity and this silence entirely upon their blessed work. And even this was only partly true, for they would have preferred to make seven chemises rather than damp one of them with sweat in order to fill up those two little pages. And they were always sending each other invitations or promising each other visits which were never made, the one arguing that she could not leave her family, the others that they could not leave their work; but the thing that particularly alarmed the latter was the length of the journey, which they thought of with fantastic exaggeration and about which they were cognizant of one particular chilling detail: that in order to get to Ancona one had to change at Faenza. What sort of place could it be, this Ancona for which one had to change trains, when, in order to get to Rome, one did not have to change at all? "Ancona!" A final sigh accompanied the name: "Poor Augusta, whatever sort of place had she got to! Of course *that* is why she never came to pay a little visit at Santa Maria."

At one time only had there been a lively exchange of letters—three years after her marriage, because of the birth of a baby. First Augusta announced that she was expecting a child, and then wrote to inform them of the birth of a boy as soon as the event had taken place. And this time the sisters answered with an outpouring of affection, sending, at the right moment, a parcel of exquisite garments for the baby that was to be born—little caps and other clothes either chosen or made by themselves, and fit for a lord. When all this was over, their epistolary habits resumed the interchange of empty solemnities, and to such an extent that Augusta, who had left home when the sisters were at the beginning of their hard-won but successful climb, did not even know what degree of fortune they had achieved nor how they had been able to recover, completely, the ancient family heritage, since—as the sisters always said—it is not a good plan to mention

personal interests in letters; the real truth of the matter being that they considered it more prudent not to make a display of their prosperity and their wealth to poor relations. Augusta, on her side, always took the greatest care not to put forward any request that might be thought indiscreet; so thoroughly had she maintained her mildness and her reserve and, at the same time, her independence with regard to them that she had announced her betrothal and her imminent separation from them only a short time before her marriage, so that her sisters barely had time to make her a chemise for her wedding day. Her wedding, even, was humble and colourless, and left them as indifferent as if it had been any ordinary, unimportant happening, and without any of the natural jealousies that Giselda's marriage, a few years later, was to arouse.

But this sister who had sought to occupy so little place in their existence came to occupy a highly important one when, as the result of one of those momentous fatalities that hang, all unknown, over our heads, she was left a widow, in extreme poverty, and, after barely a year of widowhood, was smitten by a violent disease and herself also died after a few days.

Before they received the news of her serious condition, Teresa and Carolina had already, from a distance, shown their concern and their generosity in this emergency, and were thinking out the best method of helping her, repeating their invitation to her to come to Florence, where they would give her shelter and care and would assist her to establish herself in a new way of life; for the poor woman had taken a new job in a shoe factory, since the work done at home did not give her enough to live upon. And when they finally decided to go to her, they arrived only just in time to see her die.

At the appearance of her sisters, whom she had not seen for eighteen years, the dying woman's face lit up, and she seemed anxious to say some word or other that she had not the courage to utter. Humble and timid in life, she still remained so in the face of death; but at last her heart overflowed with the torment

of it, and when she felt that her reason would soon fail her, with tear-dimmed eyes and throat strangled with sobs she seized her sisters' hands and twice repeated a name: "Remo, Remo." And she pressed their hands like someone pressing a beloved hand for the last good-bye.

She was leaving a fourteen-year-old son, who would either have to be sent to Rome to the large and poverty-stricken family of her husband, with which they had almost broken off relations, or, alternatively, to an orphanage. She felt that she was leaving him ill provided for, and she was dying unhappy.

At the reassuring sound of the word "yes," pronounced, one after the other, by the two sisters in an access of profound pity, the face of the poor dying woman grew serene and she laid down her head as though to sleep.

Humbled by the grandeur of death, and having reached a state of sympathy with their sister that they had never been able to achieve during her lifetime, the two women repeated to themselves, in a more emphatic manner, the "yes" that they had so spontaneously uttered. It is not easy to forget the words of the dying nor the promises made to them in that hour.

They began looking at each other, feeling all at sea in that cold, empty house, so miserably poor, so dreary in its almost complete lack of ordinary household furniture. And they looked and looked again at Remo standing motionless in the middle of it, without despair and without shyness, just as though he were deprived of the will power that makes people act; looking back at them with two big black eyes, oval in shape and suffused with light but with no sign of aggressiveness or ardour in them, slow when they moved, dwelling on an object without curiosity or surprise, as though in expectation or uncertainty, and with a disturbing clearness and serenity in them that would have been lacking in a quickly moving, eager glance.

It seemed as if the boy, through the voice of his own instinct, had a premature sense of the influence of his eyes upon those two women, that he was establishing his own mastery without the

slightest effort—with a perfectly natural simplicity, in fact—so that it was already becoming easy for him, aided by his sad circumstances and his attractiveness, to read their feelings and discover their awe of him while at the same time completely concealing his own reactions. These extremely beautiful eyes of his were framed in long and vigorous lashes which, once united, sealed up his eyes with, as it were, a tiny hedge; and above them were silken eyebrows, thick and glossy, perfectly blank, lofty and noble and elegant in outline, which threw into relief the beauty and profundity of the eyes.

Having fulfilled the last compassionate offices for their sister, Teresa and Carolina left again for Florence.

From the moment when they had uttered their generous “yes” at the bedside of their unfortunate sister, after which the latter had seemed to resign herself with confidence into the hand of God, the two sisters felt themselves a prey to a hitherto unknown agitation which increased steadily as they watched their silent nephew—silent for no obvious reason, but as though the great wisdom of his young mind suggested to him that for the moment, in his position, there was nothing to be done but to be silent and to wait. This increased their anxiety out of all proportion.

They would have preferred to see him weeping and giving way to despair, so that they might comfort him and themselves take up a decided position, of an easy or normal kind, suitable to their own spirit and character; for in certain cases people judge the greatest degree of difficulty and the most abnormal of attitudes to be easy and normal. And, in order to calm their own agitation in face of this unforeseen serenity and composure, they produced, for their own benefit, the most varied interpretations, guided, instinctively, by their own feelings.

Did his attitude conceal the thought that dominated his mind? It might be so. They attributed it to natural timidity, even though the boy’s bearing and aspect hardly admitted of such a thing. Or was it a curb imposed in manly fashion upon himself, to prevent

his giving way to wretchedness and despair in front of people he had never seen? Such an outburst would have been quite permissible in his case, and they would have been extremely happy to encourage it and to put up with any kind of excess, provided they could feel themselves on familiar ground.

There were moments, while their secret discomfort at such a state of affairs was increasing, when the boy seemed to be examining them with curiosity, judging them to be very odd, and restraining his laughter merely because he had no wish to laugh, rather than from any refinement or civilized good manners. They would even have liked to encourage this hint of laughter, to see him laugh, yes, even to roar with laughter, shamelessly; they would have laughed with him without the remotest suspicion that they were really laughing at themselves, for it had never crossed their minds that there could be any question of anyone laughing at their own revered persons. In the end, despair and gaiety came to have exactly the same value; what they did not wish was to remain in suspense.

Once they were in the train, their minds were relieved by the movement and distracted by the landscape, which had an unconscious influence upon them though they did not even see it; and the farther they went from the place of sorrow the less they felt its weight pressing upon them, so that they partly recovered their assurance and took on the appearance and the graces of old maids on a holiday; they observed the boy, and there were moments when, almost forgetting what had happened, they wondered how he came to be with them and what he was doing there, even though, at the same time, the tormenting fact that he *was* there weighed heavily upon them, the torment being merely intensified by the calm, penetrating look in his eyes.

He had been accustomed to the seriousness of his mother, who had been devoid of all feminine frivolity or coquetry, to the black dress she had been wearing for a year to match her heavy burden of sorrows and troubles, to her stiff, rather tired way of moving, to her colourless mildness and the kind of affection she gave him,

as of one who is resigned to poverty and to every sort of misfortune and to the monotony and harshness of an existence without comfort and without pleasure: and all this helped him to study these two women without betraying his own thoughts and without seeking (even from the moment of their first meeting) to capture their good will by means of hypocritical or insinuating words or deeds; for it was evident that his presence and the way he looked at them easily disturbed them and gave them a pleasurable excitement, encouraging them to be more feminine, in the awkward manner of those who have not the habit of it (just as they were on Sundays, at the window overlooking the Settignano road). Yet all the time there was growing in their minds a longing to say all sorts of reassuring things to him in order to cheer him up. They wanted to tell him at once that they would love him, and that it would be the same for him with them as with his own mother—"Poor Augusta! Ah! Ah!" Reading each other's thought, the two sisters sighed together: "Just the same as with her"; but they would refrain from saying "better"—a word which the boy would receive with a brief but telling raising of the eyebrows, himself feeling no need to proffer an opinion, and forcing them to no ill-bred acknowledgment of the truth. They wanted to inform him that their house was a palace compared with the hovel from which he had come, an abode of gentlefolk, comfortable and healthy and well appointed, lacking nothing; with a maid who did the cleaning and prepared breakfast, lunch, and dinner; who also did the washing, and to whom he himself might give orders for anything he needed. They were thrown into confusion by the burning necessity they felt to give, to give to this nephew who had fallen from heaven into the midst of them, and who was creating so much havoc in their dried-up bosoms. At Santa Maria he would find companions to play with, the sons of good, respectable people, of course, though rather inferior to him in class and position. . . . What the lips of the two old maids were burning to tell him was that they were rich yes, rich indeed, since they never spent a penny of the income from their property,

upon which they could have lived quite comfortably; and not merely that, but they were also steadily accumulating a good part of what they derived from their work. . . . In order not to lessen the surprise of their arrival it was best to be silent on all these points, and they limited themselves to smiling in a half-roguish, half-sibylline manner—which, added to their excitement, lent to their two faces an expression that was far from grave and even farther from mentally stable, and which the boy observed in just the same way, apparently, as he observed the passing landscape, though perhaps with rather greater intensity, especially in the case of Carolina, who was sitting beside him and who, from time to time, puffed and panted with heat (it was the beginning of December) and shook from head to foot in the ferment of emotion that possessed her.

The boy looked at them and then looked, every now and then, out of the window at the landscape, deeply interested in it yet never losing his composure; not with the bursting, irrepressible eagerness of childhood, but as though he had seen it and seen it again a hundred times, though actually this was the first train journey he had made; he contemplated it with the quiet satisfaction that can be distinguished in the accustomed eye of an adult.

The two women, on the other hand, did not look out, for they took no interest in the view; they looked at each other, or they both looked, with intention, at their nephew; nor were they themselves highly accomplished travellers, for, at the respectable age of fifty, this was only their second train journey. Journeys, for them, implied a trial of an almost inhuman kind and were the cause of a complete disorganization of the the whole being; there was not an organ in their whole system that functioned with regularity, and they existed in a kind of delirious fever—whether they were going to Rome to kneel at the feet of the Holy Father after having presented him with a stole and embroidered a chasuble for a cardinal, or were hurrying to the deathbed of a good, brave sister and coming back after a few days with a boy of

fourteen who was, to them, an object of the most complete amazement. Could they have possibly imagined, only a week before, that they would find themselves in the train again all alone with him? What surprises fate has in store for us, and just at the moment when we are most confident that there is nothing going on behind our backs! Their minds were in a state of disorder, and from time to time their lips would articulate: "Poor Augusta! Ah! Ah!"—which gradually was reduced to a mere "Ah! Ah!" that reminded one of persons telling their beads from inveterate habit, the unchanging words rising automatically to their lips in such a languid manner that they die away as soon as they are born, or are actually born dead, and yet are perfectly comprehensible even without being uttered.

Of the visit to Rome and the three days that it had occupied, they had retained a memory of columns—columns and more columns, columns in rows, columns standing up, columns lying prostrate, columns upon columns; half columns and pieces of columns; disused columns lying flat, sick, and infirm, or cut to pieces like the women who are stuffed into suitcases. They had lost themselves in a forest of columns, in the depths of which had appeared, bringing peace to the heart after the vague suffering of an agitated dream, the white, gentle figure of the benedictory Pontiff, who, without putting foot to floor, had come down from the blueness above into the light which poured in from another room that was flooded with sunshine and all covered with tapestries and pictures and magnificent gilding; and then, his fatherly gesture, his sweet expression as he blessed the devout, and his voice, rather toneless and remote, not from physical weakness but from a goodness that was no longer of this earth. When the priest who accompanied them showed them the remains of imperial Rome and the entrance to the Colosseum, and told them that the ancient Romans—even the women, even the great ladies—used to take delight in watching gladiators engaged in mortal combat or fighting with wild beasts until they killed them or were themselves torn to pieces, and that this same

treatment was meted out to the first Christians condemned to die, they recovered from the bewilderment of those three days and fled in horror, making the sign of the Cross again and again; nor was there any way of persuading them to go inside, and they remained outside, turning their backs on the monument and muttering indistinctly. Nor did they wish to see any more of ancient Rome, which had assumed for them an appearance of abominable ferocity. And whenever they remembered the Colosseum they made the sign of the Cross and put up a request to the Lord to keep the holy old man firmly in his seat, so that such impious customs should never rise again from those ruins.

Of the journey to Ancona, on the other hand, the poor things' chief memory was of going into the bowels of the earth (the line from Florence to Faenza includes forty-eight tunnels) through perfectly black corridors which had finally brought them to a room where death reigned in all its pitifulness and all its squalor. The sight of the Adriatic, of which they caught a glimpse on a rainy November evening, was but a dim revelation to them, and mournful was the sound of the sea which they were hearing for the first time, like that of an immense plate of grey metal moved by an unknown hand to strike terror into the hearers, beneath a pall of funereal blackness.

And now they were returning, a few days later, on a damp morning in which rain alternated with faint hints of sunshine in the sky, with a tinge of pink wandering amongst the clouds; they were also returning in a state of mind that did not permit them the calmness necessary for looking about and enjoying themselves.

The stop at Faenza and the changing of trains considerably worsened this state of affairs.

When, after the hurry-scurry of the transfer, they had arranged themselves in the new train that was to take them to Florence, they gave a simultaneous heavy sigh, showing that there were indeed lungs inside those atrophied bosoms: they had rushed along the station platform as if under machine-gun fire,

or with an enemy at their heels. Teresa sat in the corner by the window, and in the corner facing her sat Remo, beside Carolina, who had left the best place for him. And since it was nearly midday and there were men running along the platform carrying luncheon baskets (they were running in order to give the idea of a hot meal all ready prepared that must not be allowed to get cold) Teresa thought the boy must be hungry and that this was the right moment to do something about it. After a wordless exchange of views, the sisters told each other simultaneously that they had no wish to eat anything: "Not for me . . . not for me . . . phew!"—and unless, possibly, they took only two baskets, it would be too much: two among three. Teresa cut short this typical consultation, which did not escape her nephew's attention, and, in order to give him an immediate impression of open-handedness, took three baskets from the man, though frightened out of her wits at the price. On this point she could not contain herself, but she assumed the resigned, competent air of one who knows from long experience that there are certain occasions when you have to let yourself be plucked. With the same sum Niobe could have made luncheon for twelve.

As he was beginning, at that hour of the day, to be aware of a certain craving in the neighbourhood of the heart, Remo at once showed himself pleased at Teresa's idea and, watching her manœuvres without taking any part in them, smiled at Carolina, who asked him whether by any chance he wasn't a little hungry, and smiled again in very obvious agreement. His smile consisted of a mere parting of the lips in a fleeting movement of a mouth whose fleshiness was rendered innocent because of its very beautiful shape. Starting in a delicate line between nose and chin, and divided by a slight furrow, his lips swelled out, curling sensitively and showing a rather large surface of red; and when they parted, there was a glimpse of a row of teeth of an enchanting regularity and whiteness. The corners of his mouth curled upwards only very slightly to produce a smile, lighting up his face with a scarcely perceptible movement. The glance of the boy's eyes was

in perfect harmony with his smile, for it achieved a considerable effect by means that escaped the notice of the beholder. It made you think that he must have made a long and careful study of the phenomenon, in order to obtain the greatest possible result from his own physiognomy with the smallest possible effort. The truth of the matter was that, as yet, there was no artifice in him at all, but only nature, who had studied the matter with excellent effect. So that the two smiles, the first of satisfaction, the second of thanks, were, for the two women, a reward by which they felt themselves both flattered and placed under an obligation.

For a boy of only fourteen, Remo was so well and so harmoniously developed that he might easily have been sixteen, not only in figure but in the expression of his face and his look of composure, which did not seem to be a matter of timidity or merely momentary. There was nothing in him of the disjointed force that makes a boy move in an irregular unpremeditated fashion, following the impulse of his blood rather than of his still unformed reason; in every act he displayed an innate watchfulness, and his bearing was that of a youth who, conscious of the approach of manly dignity, already knows how to restrain himself amongst adults—and then, of course, to let himself go, without reserve, in the company of those of his own age.

Carolina, perhaps in order to justify to herself the strength of her own impulse, or to free herself from the tangle of sensations that oppressed her heart, was quite incapable of resisting that twice-repeated smile: she threw her arms round the boy and kissed him on the mouth. And he, on his side, did not exactly return her kiss but abandoned his mouth to hers, making no attempt to withdraw it, prepared to surrender it as freely as she wished. It was she who, becoming aware of a new kind of excitement at this protracted contact, drew back in bewilderment, still continuing to gaze at the mouth of the boy, who remained impassive and imperturbable, as though the sudden access of tenderness had been, for him, a purely mechanical act, with no depth of feeling in it, and leaving not the slightest trace.

Carolina, on the other hand, felt as if she had been seized and turned upside down; after which she blushed all over. She took out her handkerchief, fanned herself, wiped her brow and her eyes, and, wriggling about on the seat, still went on fanning herself, saying twice over: "Ah! Ah!"—by which we do not know whether she again meant: "Poor Augusta!" All this caused her sister, who had noticed these strange goings on, to turn her attention from the business of the lunch baskets and look anxiously towards the travellers who were sitting in the opposite corners of the compartment—two of those well-fed, coarse-looking men that one sees travelling in the Romagna with big cloaks over their shoulders, with faces that show their heart's contentment and paunches even more content than their hearts; men whom one knows at once to be engaged in agricultural affairs, wine or corn or cattle merchants, and at the sight of whom Carolina, already red in the face, turned white, as if to a vague feeling of shame was added a feeling of fear—fear of a new, unknown kind.

The operations with the luncheon baskets filled in this awkward gap.

As soon as he was in possession of his own basket, Remo started fumbling in it with all the eagerness of youth; then, having made a very rapid inventory of its contents, he began to consume the food with an avidity which became obvious only when he fished out an apple from its bag and, gracefully but firmly, started biting into it, peel and all, while the women were still in the first stages of their preliminary examination. They fumbled and fumbled in the paper bags, putting on a stern expression at the sight of each thing that they pulled out; they would then raise it unwillingly to their lips, only to pull it away again at the first contact; they twisted their mouths this way and that, at the same time acting as mirrors to each other. Now they would hold their mouths tight-shut, with lips rounded, now shut but stretched to a wide, horizontal line, refusing to allow them to perform their function: this they did in concert; and in order to allow their disgust (the only thing that could have entered) to escape again,

they turned down their lower lips, like a mask on a fountain with a mouth through which water trickles.

All this was done partly in order not to appear greedy, but fastidious and hard to please, and also because they really had no wish to eat; but the chief reason was that, being unaccustomed to eating away from home, they were instinctively mistrustful of everything they put into their mouths that had not been prepared by the hands of Niobe. So that, as soon as he had devoured his own portion, Remo, observing them and seeing that the coast was clear, began to cast exploratory glances into the baskets that the two women held on their knees.

In response to these glances they started offering him a bit here and a bit there, until finally they relinquished their baskets altogether and handed them over to him. This offer produced the most spontaneous joy in all of them—in the givers, who asked nothing better than to be rid of what they were giving, and in the boy, who asked nothing better than to be allowed to eat his aunts' portions as well as his own; and the latter noticed with great satisfaction that their nephew's face, which preserved its proper shape in the act of looking as well as in that of laughing, retained its composure even in the more difficult act of eating, even when urged on by a first-class appetite and unsupported by the usual accessories for eating in a civilized manner. On those features voracity was no more than a polite youthful impetus which never degenerated into the bestial, but which, on the contrary, revealed an assurance rare in a boy of that age; in the same way as the beauty of their shape purified the fleshy fullness of his lips.

Carolina observed that his hair, which was very black and glossy and had well-marked, wide, regular waves in it, was neatly combed, following, simply and gracefully, the shape of his head, and that his suit, although it was of poor material and badly made, nevertheless did not conceal the distinction and fine proportions of an elegant figure.

All these observations and manoeuvres were made with an eye

to Florence, to Santa Maria, to Niobe, and they alternated with those which were still directed, in the form of sighs, towards Ancona, which, however, was rapidly receding into the distance: "Ah! Ah!" The "Poor Augusta!" was now nothing more than a whispered cry which became steadily briefer and less perceptible. The teller of beads had finally dozed off and now emitted sounds such as are produced in sleep only by the most inveterate of habits: "Poor Augusta! Ah! Ah!" This was in order to compensate her for having been always poor and good and unfortunate, someone who knew no joy in life except sacrifice and duty: "Poor Augusta! Ah! Ah!" Sainted creature, always unfortunate, even to the end! And they concluded their sighing with a "Santa Maria!" —looking at their nephew and with difficulty restraining themselves from adding the words that were making them tingle all over, irresistibly.

Remo, when he heard this name spoken, parted his red lips in a smile, while his eyes threw forth rays of heatless light—or, to be more exact, rays which warmed others but not himself; slightly raising one eyebrow, or faintly curling up one corner of his mouth, he smiled at this name which made him think that his journey was going to end in a convent. "At Santa Maria, you'll see . . ." they kept repeating to him, unable to contain themselves any longer: "you'll see Giselda, you'll see Niobe." These names, all of them feminine, merely strengthened his youthful impression. "You'll see what a lot of fruit there is on the farm in summer!" Just as it might be in the nuns' garden.

He looked at them one at a time, displaying the greatest aptitude for understanding all the announcements that came to him from those two mouths: "What a lot of fruit there is on the farm!" The word "fruit" caused his face to light up and made him smile.

In a tunnel that showed no sign of coming to an end Carolina, once again overcome by tenderness, embraced him, kissed him, hugged him; in the first place because she could not resist doing so, but at the same time in order to find out whether there would

be a repetition of the mysterious feeling that had so disturbed her when she had embraced her nephew in the station at Faenza: and so indeed there was—in fact, stronger. And, just as before, the boy surrendered his lips to her, scarcely moving them, without really kissing her; so that she would have withdrawn even sooner if the darkness of the tunnel had not protected her.

At the repetition of this act, Teresa stared in astonishment at her sister, stamping her feet in anger, and then looking at the two men at the far end of the carriage, who, immersed in their own practical conversation, were very far from taking any notice of them.

They were on their way to Florence to sell pigs.

When they arrived at Santa Maria, to the great joy of the aunts who had such an endless number of things to show him, Remo did nothing but gaze. He spoke little, and at this the two women did not feel themselves so gratified, for they were hoping for a greater degree of expansiveness on his side. They would have liked to hear protestations of delight and of legitimate pride at the sight of things which certainly could not but be agreeable to him and which, in a sort of way, began to be his own property. But timidity, and, even more, sorrow, prevented him from becoming expansive, from giving free rein to his own feelings and youthful enthusiasms. They put all the blame upon timidity and sorrow, of which the former would gradually vanish and the latter be soothed away by the natural processes of life and of external circumstances. And they tried, by every sort of care and attention, though with due respect to these sacred emotions, to hasten their disappearance as much as possible.

Remo talked little and stared about him, while round him went on endlessly prolonged stories about the famous journey, the forty-eight tunnels—"Four hours underground!"—and all the time with that feeling of discomfort in the stomach, which it is easy to understand, at not seeing the Lord's daylight. And then the change of trains at Faenza, and their fear of getting into the

wrong train and ending up goodness knows where; how many times they had enquired in terror: "Is this the Florence train? Is this really the right one? Does this train really go to Florence?" Until at last the guard had blown his little trumpet and the train had moved away, only to enter once more those infernal tunnels. And the arrival at Ancona, too; the damp, cold night, the sea all black, and the sound of it sending cold shivers down their backs: and then the catastrophe. After a lapse of four and a half years the chronicle of the journey to Rome was still being related, with variations, at Santa Maria: the visit to the Holy Father all mixed up with the account of that unspeakable strumpet Messalina and the Vestal Virgins amusing themselves watching the Christians being torn to pieces by wild beasts: "For all of them, all of them!" In this new journey another word, twice repeated, like a sort of destiny, had imprinted itself on their minds and on their hearts: "Remo, Remo." The gentle caress of the sainted old man, the despairing grip of their dying sister. For the good name of the family they minimized the conditions of abject poverty in which they had found her: "She was living in a little house . . . a nice little house . . ."—but they knew perfectly well what sort of place it was, this charming little house, though they sought to attribute its melancholy to the almost barbarous region in which it was situated, and to the presence of death. With Giselda, with Niobe, with the peasants—yes, even with them—with the whole neighbourhood, which flocked to hear the news of poor Augusta, well remembered by the older ones among them and by her own contemporaries, they discussed her appearance and her character, recalling her figure, exalting her goodness, her true, her striking goodness, without shadow or stain, a goodness which now, after her death, rose to heights unassailable; also her resignation to a fate which was always adverse, and the melancholy imprinted upon her face, as though she had borne her bitter sentence written upon her brow, ever since her birth. The effect on the younger ones, on the very young who did not remember her or who had not known her, on the children, was that they were listening to

stories of some celestial figure, of a saint or a martyr. There was no end to the sighs, the memories, the invocations, the eyes lifted up to heaven, the clasped hand. It always happens, even with those whom nobody ever thought of troubling about when living, that they gain a moment's attention in the hour of death; and even if a dog would not have bothered to greet them with a wag of its tail, when they pass feet forwards everyone respectfully takes off his hat. But let us not be distracted by invidious reflections. Everyone gathered to hear the news, to see Remo, the son of this saint, this martyr, all that was left upon earth of so much heavenly virtue, of so much divine goodness.

From a sense of duty as visitors and a feeling of respect towards the dead woman, as well as on account of their happy relations with the two sisters, they all felt a strongly marked impulse of kindness towards the boy, only to remain bewildered and rebuffed by his lack of warmth in failing to respond to the warmth of their advances and to their effusions of sympathy and affection; for he observed with unruffled calm, and without budging an inch, this spontaneous movement towards him on the part of all the village women, both old and young, while they, chilled by his reserve, ended by gazing at him in astonishment and ecstasy, their words dying on their lips, and then finally switching the torrent of their discourse in the direction of his two aunts, praising them for the noble work they were doing (for which the Lord would recompense them in eternity, both on earth and in heaven, but more especially in heaven) in opening their house to the orphan, who, vigorous as he was, and already growing up, still had need of every sort of care, and of guidance particularly, and watchful love; for indeed he was just at the age when vigilance and the affection of those dear to him were especially needed. And they rejoiced because he would find everything there, everything that could be found in the most loving of families—rejoicing with the benefactresses since they were unable to rejoice with the beneficiary as much as they thought proper, since he failed to take a satisfactory part in this game of give-and-take.

One or two people murmured in a sly, insincere manner that, for the two sisters, the good work was as notable as the sacrifice was small, adding with a wink that one extra mouth in the house of the Materassis meant no more than pulling a single hair out of a cat's back. Others, again, exclaimed in a mysterious, solemn tone: "Another burden, it makes another burden here." Meaning that all misfortunes came home to roost there, making more and more burdens for those shoulders to carry: "What women! What women!" For years and years they had supported their poor, sick father, they had supported their sister and their mother, they had won back the family property; and after their sister married she had come back again, only five years later, to live there: "Always there, everybody always there, eating at their table, everybody on *their* shoulders. More burdens! More burdens!" And, finally, the only person who had never wanted to be a burden upon them had died when still young, bequeathing them a boy to provide for: "Another burden on them! It's fate. Another burden!" They had managed to deal with everything, those extraordinary women: "What women!" They had faced all adversities, overcome all misfortunes, shouldered all burdens: "What women!"

Remo spoke little, and the more excited the chatter around him grew, the less he spoke, but he looked at everything; he looked at everything and listened to everything without ever losing his composure and his calm—in fact, he displayed an even greater degree of these things just at the moment when he might have been expected to lose them. He retained his Olympian aloofness and took no part in the gossip and the protestations of the village, being prevented by a well-developed sense of manliness from giving anyone the advantage over him: he neither took part nor did he withdraw, but observed silently and kept his opinion to himself with a natural grace of his own. The others, no longer knowing what sort of fish they were after, protested that they did not wish to force his timidity and reserve, to intrude upon the sorrow with which they imagined him to be filled and pervaded

and overflowing. "Great sorrows are dumb," as someone sagely hinted; while others concluded, with apocalyptic utterance: "There is only one greater sorrow than that of a son for his mother—that of a mother for her son." He succeeded in maintaining such an air of good breeding that he did not even give way to any of the usual quick movements that men, even when very young, often make use of, as signals of entreaty, when they hear disasters being brought up for discussion or their own existence being weighed in the balance; he was capable of keeping his hands, like the rest of his person, in check, and in the end everybody would be staring at him and examining him, asking themselves over and over again what sort of animal he could be, and whether he really resembled his mother—"Poor Augusta! Ah! Ah!"—and in what way; and, having carefully reviewed every part of him, they came to the conclusion (except for such people as are capable of finding likenesses between a bull and a caterpillar) that he resembled his mother only in character, in that reserved character of hers, secretive, calm, timid. . . . And there indeed was the boy, a living confirmation of these hypothetical affinities, for no amount of chatter, however silly or however intriguing it might be, was capable of altering his exemplary attitude, which was much the same as that of a tower blown upon by light zephyrs.

His aunts, on the other hand, observed him in the fear that he might feel lost in his new surroundings, amongst unknown people; that he might be suffering humiliation or pain, or not feeling well, or be frightened of expressing himself; and, believing that they could divine his thoughts from the look in his eyes, they piled information upon information. They told him who this man or that woman was, whose son or daughter or mother-in-law or daughter-in-law or nephew or niece or mother, how many children they had and what was their trade: and all this to make him master of the situation and help him to feel at home.

He looked at things with the same interest with which he looked at people; he looked at doors, at windows, at plants,

without any apparent curiosity, like someone who is counting or taking measurements.

The only things that provoked a childish curiosity in him were the embroidery frames of his aunts, and at them he smiled openly; they were things that seemed strange, and at the same time pleasing, to him; and he looked at the women as if they were two rare beasts, these two women who had travelled in the train with him and who were so very different now in their big white aprons, with their thick-lensed glasses, bending over their frames from morning till night, absorbed in making chemises and drawers, combinations and petticoats for ladies. This curiosity, childish only in appearance, concealed another kind of curiosity, far more profound and not yet fully formed in his adolescent mind. When he found himself alone in this room with his aunts and Niobe, he would look round with a half-entranced, half-satisfied air, as though he had fallen from heaven and, on recovering consciousness and vigour, had realized that he had had a fortunate landing amongst all these rather mysterious, almost secret garments with which the room overflowed: indeed, he felt he had landed in a soft place, and was filled with a quiet satisfaction.

The interest with which he examined the things on the tables, or followed the making of them, brought a slight relaxation of discipline to the two women who formed, as it were, a single living unit with their grotesque-looking machines; it distracted them, made them laugh, and, for the first time, took their vigilant thoughts off their work. He would bend down over their shoulders to see a design or trace out the embroidery taken from it, and when they felt his fresh, youthful, fruit-scented breath on their necks and faces, a novel, unexpected feeling of well-being would run through them, bringing with it a swift intoxication, a slight giddiness.

One day Remo performed a gesture so obviously revealing that it threw them into confusion more than any words: he took from the table a pair of pink drawers that were finished and ready to be ironed, and, holding them up between his fingers, appeared

desirous of displaying them to the whole world. This gesture pleased the two women so much that they stopped working and held their sides with laughter. Looked at with fresh eyes and in the hands that were now holding them, these objects took on a new appearance even for them, as though they were seeing for the first time the things they had been creating for more than thirty years and by which they were surrounded. Carolina, dripping with threads, put down her frame on the floor and tried to snatch the drawers out of his hands, but the boy, just as she was going to catch him, avoided her with the utmost agility and went and planted himself in another part of the room, still holding out the drawers; and he made her run round and round the table until he grew tired of the game and put them back again. Assailed by an impulse of tenderness, Carolina threw her arms round his neck and kissed him just as she had done in the train, afterwards retreating in disorder. Remo did not respond with a quick, cool kiss, nor did he suffer himself to be kissed in the usual inattentive, hasty way of boys, who dispense the freshness and candour of their charms in a vague and unsuspecting manner; but he abandoned his mouth to her with no sign of wishing to withdraw it again, as though he were giving her some object to kiss, and not a part of himself. It was this strange and novel feeling that urged her on to embrace him and then made her retreat in a confusion far greater than it would have been had he returned her kiss.

Seeing this repetition of what had happened in the train, Teresa, who had at once stopped laughing, began to stamp her feet in annoyance and impatience, just as though the pig sellers were still there to see. Nor could she explain to herself the discomfort caused in her by the sight of this kindly, affectionate, innocent act, a daily habit for any ordinary mother, a lasting expression of maternal and filial affection. Was it not therefore allowable for a fifty-year-old aunt, who had perforce to assume the functions of a mother, to kiss a nephew who might still be considered a child?

Hearing all the rumpus, Niobe arrived on the scene.

Remo looked with curiosity at Niobe, too, but at her—when his aunts were not looking—he had already taken to smiling in a quite decided sort of way, and, had it not been that his eyes never assumed any vulgar expression, it might have been thought that he was giving her knowing looks—to which she, being incapable of containing herself, replied with glances of her own whose vulgarity was redeemed by her natural goodness and warmth. A simplehearted creature, she was never able to hide her feelings, or the joy that she felt at the presence of her new master. And Remo, on coming into the house, had, with the highly developed instinct that children have for turning to any quarter where they feel they are liked, grasped at the offer that came to him from that direction. Niobe had been his first conquest; she had felt uplifted at his appearance, and this pair of trousers which, by a miracle, had fallen from heaven amongst all the old petticoats had made her feel that life was more wonderful than ever; she could hardly believe her own eyes, from sheer happiness. Apart from her mistresses, who, owing to their prodigious activity, were raised, in her eyes, to masculine dignity, she considered woman in general to be a low kind of merchandise, and only the male to be worthy of respect and esteem; she had therefore offered her friendship, unhesitatingly, to Remo, proud to serve him and be useful to him.

One thing only he looked upon with mistrust, in an undecided, serious manner—and that was Giselda.

As the representative, in that house, of discontent and opposition, Giselda had abstained from any over-tender manifestations; and not merely that, but, seeing how things were going, had slipped in a few wise pieces of advice. She said that, for the good of the boy, it was necessary to make use of a certain strictness, of a less adoring, indulgent attitude, if they wished to make a useful, honest man of him and not a good-for-nothing like so many other young men; and that over-solicitude and blandishments were both useless and harmful.

Pretending to listen to her, the sisters nodded evasively at her

protests—"Yes . . . of course . . . certainly . . . it's quite natural . . ."—exchanging highly eloquent glances all the time: "It would have been a good thing to have been strict with *her* when she gave reason for it, not with our nephew, who gives no reason at all. It didn't look as though a useful, honest man was what *she* had wanted, considering she turned in exactly the opposite direction, against all the good advice she must have been given, as well as the information she actually *was* given. And as for good-for-nothings, she must admit it was her own fault if she had got to know a famous champion of the breed." That bold, happy departure of hers, at the age of twenty, with her handsome, adventurous, well-dressed young man, had left her sisters with chronic kinks in their gall bladders. And it is immediately understandable that, when resistance began to show itself from that quarter, Teresa and Carolina redoubled their own intentions towards the boy, who looked at this third aunt with grave consideration, as something unaccountable and incalculable.

Niobe looked upon Giselda as a kind of amphibian, something halfway between servant and mistress. As is well known, there is no one like a domestic for despising and disregarding those who are not the real masters, who are only partial masters, neither fish, flesh, nor fowl; and she backed up her real mistresses—nay, more, she brazenly outdid them—encouraging them in every possible way by making demonstrations of affection and concern for the boy, who looked at her, when his aunts could not see, with his brightest smile, as though an indissoluble pact had been concluded between them.

Many were the innovations that the aunts introduced with the arrival of their nephew. They no longer had their meals in the kitchen, as they had always done, but in the dining room, as on Sundays, with a fine tablecloth and the best crockery; and, instead of swallowing down their food in a hurry, they now ate in a leisurely middle-class manner, talking about all sorts of things, not merely drawers and chemises, and discussing the food and the skill of Niobe, who, in working out the programme for next

day, introduced into it, without letting them know, all the things she had noticed Remo liked; while the two aunts, though they noticed quite well, pretended to be stupid and let her do as she wished. And one day when they had asked him at table whether he liked beefsteaks, he answered with such a vigorous "By God, yes!" that the two women were delighted beyond words, calling to mind the scene when they had been unable to get back the drawers from him. This manly reply also reminded Teresa of the little pink and white cap that they had made for him shortly before he was born, and Carolina, springing to her feet at the recollection, took her napkin and built up a kind of turban on the head of Remo, who sat as still as a doll and allowed himself to be first adorned and then admired; while she, with the impulse of tenderness that she felt at these great moments, clasped him in her arms and gave him a kiss, to which he responded in the manner you already know. Teresa was both laughing over the matter of the cap and at the same time stamping her feet because of the kisses, which irritated her so much, though she did not know why, just as they excited her sister, though she did not know why either: was it perhaps because Remo, owing to the gravity of his expression and bearing, already had too much the look of a grown-up man to be treated as a child, or because there was a suspicion of incipient down on his upper lip?

Giselda, who had not opened her mouth during the meal nor laughed during the final comic scene, swallowed down her last mouthful and then rose and left the room without a word. And Niobe, who had come to the doorway to share as much as possible in her mistresses' rejoicings, drew aside to let Giselda pass and then, as soon as she had gone out, made such faces at her retreating back that the others, who were still sitting at table, burst out laughing again.

Their first concern towards their guest was to make him eat, and they stuffed him to the utmost limit, always fearing that he would not have had enough. And in this matter they met with an immediate response and an unreserved frankness, for he was

ready to undergo every sort of test in this field. Then there was the matter of establishing the degree of his relationship with the neighbourhood. Everyone had to treat him as belonging to a class superior to theirs, and the other boys, whether the peasants' or the tenants' sons, had to use the polite form of address, in the third person, when speaking to him—as indeed everybody was expected to do, without any exceptions. The sisters had never managed to keep this distance on their own account, for the neighbours, after a respectful beginning, a deferential greeting, came gradually in the course of conversation to treat them with familiarity, calling them simply "Teresa and Carolina," or "the Materassis," without putting anything in front of it, and never calling them "Miss," which would have pleased their hearts—"the Misses Materassi." But country people and villagers do not pay much attention to matters of form, as is well known; they are free and easy; and this is also because the friendliness of their way of living leads quickly to trustfulness. But they insisted on this distance being respected with the new member of their family.

On this point, too, Giselda made known her opinion, saying that she considered it an absurdity to maintain formal differences amongst simple people, and particularly amongst boys, who would never take such nonsensical notions seriously. They were enough to make a hen laugh. At which Teresa, throwing down her napkin on the table, declared in an authoritative manner that the hens were perfectly free to laugh if they wished, but that she, in her own house, did what she thought it right to do. She repeated twice: "*in my house*," looking at her with a hard expression. Carolina did nothing but clinch her sister's reply by a series of nods so emphatic that her eyes travelled from the ceiling to the floor and back again. And Niobe, pretending to be wringing a chicken's neck, gave it to be understood that she knew very well indeed what had to be done to stop hens from wanting to laugh. And she shook and twisted her head about so that Remo should understand that his aunt Giselda very often got out on the wrong side of her bed, as they say, and that there was no need to listen

to her because she counted for absolutely nothing in that house. Their meals, transferred solemnly to the dining room owing to the presence of their nephew, often ended in these rather acid discussions.

All these estimable discussions and differences which so closely concerned him were endured with heavenly serenity by Remo, who pretended that he did not even understand to what degree such little domestic tussles concerned him; and since he soon saw the advantages that always accrued to himself from Giselda's inexorable opposition, he began to look at this third aunt with the whimsical expression of a man who, with a complacent, easy mind and a comfortably working digestion, hums a little tune; making fun of her in the lightest manner so as to keep her as hostile as he could and avoid the disastrous possibility of seeing her become composed at any moment.

He was assigned the bedroom which had once been that of the parents, which none of the sisters had wished to take over after their death and which had remained untouched, with an atmosphere of entrancement about it. It looked out over the fields and was exactly above the kitchen, which, like all the rooms on the ground floor, had a white rust-eaten grating over its window.

The boy's gratification was evident, for it was the best and most spacious room on the first floor and it had furniture of the finest wood which the good old land agent had had made for the marriage of his son. There was still a big bed there, with a canopy of blue damask on iron pillars that ended in four gilded pine cones. Remo was delighted to be able to move about freely in this bed in which three people could have slept comfortably: beneath this canopy and these gilded ornaments his first glances in the morning, and his last before he went to sleep at night, would wander at leisure. The strange bed conducted his youthful spirit into a fabulous dreamland while he was still awake, preparing the way for his other dreams, which were vividly real even if they too were fabulous.

Amongst all the revealing qualities that threw light upon the character of the youth—carefully watched by the four women, with differing purpose but equal intensity—his insatiability for water was the first peculiarity that struck them. The jug in his room, which Niobe always kept filled, and a supplementary bucket as well were not enough, and he also found the basin too small for him to be able to wash in the way he liked. And so, as soon as he got up, he would go down into the kitchen and would take one of those tubs which are used for bringing in the grapes and carry it out through the little door which led into the field; there, naked to the waist and on the bare ground, even in the middle of winter, he would wash and wash and rinse and rinse his arms and his neck, his chest and his shoulders. He would do the same if he came home heated from exercise. Niobe was the first to admire this habit of his, and the thing pleased her so much that she was incapable of keeping her delight to herself and had to give an account to her mistresses, in the minutest detail, of how the young man's toilet was performed every morning. And, since water had never been considered an urgent necessity in that house except for drinking, they were filled with astonishment, admiration, and anxiety all at the same time. Might he not catch cold like that, or, even worse, some disease of the lungs? Niobe was able to reassure them on that score, pointing out that, if this was his habit—and she described the vigour of his body as he carried out his exercises, and the look of energy and happiness on his face as he dried himself quickly and so hard that his skin went all red—not merely could it not be the cause of any illness, but it actually guarded him against such a thing and hardened him against any wind or storm. Finally, one morning when the rigours of winter first showed signs of relaxing, the boy asked her point-blank: "Will you tell me the way to get to the river?" She, rendered suspicious by this request, answered that there was no river there, and then asked him: "And what d'you want with a river at this time of year?" "Yes, I know, I know," he replied; "in the spring, when it's not so cold," and he added: "It doesn't matter."

He saw that he had gone too far. And as he stood there, naked to the waist, drying himself, he looked away to the horizon in search of water, like a diviner guided by his own infallible desire. He had, of course, when making his way through the fields and lanes above and below the village, already come across the two streams, the Africo and the Mensola, down which the water rushes only at the moment of a thunderstorm, and half an hour later there cannot be said to be any trace of it, and there is nothing left in the two runnels but a few puddles scarcely big enough for frogs to swim in.

There was another thing which struck these women who were for the first time coming into contact with a virile adolescence; after a few mornings, in order to go down to the kitchen to wash himself, Remo no longer used the stairs, but found that the window was the shortest and most convenient way; and then along the grating outside the kitchen window, where Niobe, who was engaged in boiling the milk, caught sight of the shadowy figure descending from above and immediately vanishing, but had not time to see who it was. "Holy Virgin!" she cried with the last mouthful of breath left to her. And the milk boiled over, of course. Was it a thief? A ghost? A warning apparition? The devil coming to fetch her? Then she noticed Remo at the door, with his imperturbable face. "Goodness gracious me!" she exclaimed with her first returning breath. "You frightened me out of my wits . . . and the milk's gone over into the ashes." Then she found her voice again: "And supposing you got caught on those spikes?" Remo smiled: no, he was not the sort of man to get caught up on spikes, you had only to look at him to see that; and she understood that too, and agreed that it was an admirable form of exercise. Next morning Niobe looked forward with pleasure, every moment, to seeing the apparition from above while she prepared the coffee and milk, but this time she was careful over the milk, and she was careful, too, about revealing her new discovery to her mistresses. She waited for a propitious moment and then told them the whole story, unable to resist any longer.

Teresa was full of anxiety lest the boy fall and hurt himself, and Carolina was in fits because of those terrible spikes upon which he might be impaled; but they read in Niobe's eyes that she had not been taken in, having been able to appreciate the skill with which the feat had been performed. "No, he won't get caught on the spikes . . . he won't fall . . . he won't be impaled . . . you needn't worry, you needn't despair . . ." she repeated, drawling her words. In the end they decided that they too would like very much to see him do it.

And the next morning, with Niobe as their accomplice, they shut themselves in the recess under the stairs which served as storeroom and pantry, next to the kitchen, and in which there was a little square window with two crossbars just beside the kitchen window; and there they waited, filled with trepidation and curiosity. But Remo was by nature clever at producing surprises, and that morning he came down in the official manner by the staircase, leisurely, composed, already washed and fully dressed; and not finding his aunts in their room, as on every other morning, he went into the kitchen, where he stood in front of the door of the storeroom in which they were hiding and started talking to Niobe. "What about the aunts? Where are the aunts? Why aren't they at work? Haven't they come down yet?" He knew that at that hour they were always there. He showed no sign of moving away from the door, but stood there looking at Niobe, who could no longer keep from laughing. As soon as he had gone out of doors, she set them free, and they ran off to their embroidery frames like whipped cats.

But they too were soon admiring their nephew's agility, and, restraining their cries so as not to startle him, were able to watch his descent without any need to conceal themselves. And then Remo, in honour of their presence, having come down to the ground, insisted on going up again very speedily into his room, demonstrating that he was capable of climbing up as well as down; and no sooner was he up than he was down again in a flash. The women looked at each other, breathless. But this soon

became a normal occurrence and was spoken of at table. Remo, looking at his aunts, smiled first at one and then at the other, assuring them that climbing in and out of that house was an elementary undertaking, a job for beginners; and he explained that one could go up and down without difficulty on any side of it; so that the poor things took to casting bewildered glances upwards and downwards, no longer knowing in which direction their nephew might appear or disappear. "Excellent," broke in Giselda in a serious voice, "we'll make you into a fireman, then." At this the boy showed neither offence nor surprise; he appeared rather to welcome such a proposal as though it were a profession with which he would be fully satisfied. Teresa threw a sideways glance at her sister, a cutting, murderous glance, without a word, as much as to say: "She can't open her mouth without saying things that are either stupid or spiteful." Carolina stared at her, drawing herself up to twice her usual height. "Oh, indeed . . . a fireman . . . You poor unfortunate fool, you'll see what kind of a fireman . . . Keep your fireman to yourself!"

Although no definite proposition was in view, it was clear that they were already cherishing very exalted ambitions for their nephew.

Remo gradually took to absenting himself, to staying out for hours at a time; nor could anyone ever discover where he was or with whom, where he had been or where he came from. His answers were as calm as they were muddled and inconclusive; he knew how to make full and clever use of the fact that he was new to the village in order to give accounts of his movements from which it was not easy to reconstruct where and how he had passed the hours; he would describe places and persons in such a contradictory fashion that the liveliest arguments would start amongst the women, who were anxious to give him information that would prevent him from going to dangerous places or frequenting persons unworthy of himself and his new family. All of a sudden the enigma would seem to be solved, and then some

piece of news, some detail would be added that thrust the whole affair back into darkness: the mystery became impenetrable. At mealtimes he was always seen to appear, as if by enchantment, with praiseworthy punctuality, but, when it came to explanations, they still remained at sea.

The aunts felt that this was not a good beginning; they also felt that the responsibility of their position towards the orphan also involved the duty of looking after him seriously. But what were they to do, encompassed as they were with work which gave them no respite?

The quarrels which had broken out with Giselda on account of the lack of sympathy she had shown towards the boy ever since his arrival made it impossible for her to be entrusted with the task of looking after him, though she was the only one who would have had the time to do it: and so everything was laid upon the shoulders of Niobe, who was extremely busy from morning till night and who, it must be confessed, was not much to be recommended as an instructress, on account both of her complete ignorance and of her infinite kindness of heart and, even more important, because of the unhesitating and unbounded liking she had shown towards the boy, of which he himself was perfectly aware. She did, in fact, at once start the little game of covering up his tricks and misdemeanours, declaring always that he was with the peasants on the farm and was perfectly all right, or in the courtyard making a noise with the boys from the tenants' houses—when she herself had not the vaguest idea of where he was, and was already feeling worried about it. In addition to all this there was the persistent feeling of excitement and novelty that Remo's presence had created in the household when he fell like a shooting star amongst four women who were constantly bewildered or troubled by his saying so little, or by his questioning look, so promising and attractive in itself but so difficult to interpret.

He had arrived at the beginning of December, and at first, in the confusion caused by the tragic and unexpected event, no one

had been able to give practical thought to his situation; then had come Christmas to postpone any definite move: and the scholastic year was almost half over. . . . His papers had to be procured from Ancona, and it took a long time to get them completed and in order, and then it turned out that he did not possess even the lower elementary certificate, and that he had only with difficulty got into the third class. That was as far as his certificates, and his education, went. In order to relieve him of all possible responsibility, they concluded that it was only at Ancona that certain things could happen. Then, when they asked him how he had spent his days in that fearful city, he answered, with simplicity and manly dignity: "At the garage."

"At the garage . . ." For some time the lips of the two sisters went on toying with this word which, as will be easily understood, they were not at all disposed to drop, but rather to spit out with decency when no one was looking. "At the garage . . ." The word cleared up certain matters more and more, and it brought back the memory of that sombre journey, illuminating ever more plainly the scene of wretched poverty at Ancona, so that their sister's death presented a more and more tragic and impressive picture as she murmured: "Remo, Remo."

"Yes, yes, of course," they concluded, bringing the conversation to an end and spreading a discreet veil over it, as they had done over other details relating to the same source. "The garage . . . the workshop . . . yes, yes, of course." They did not speak of it any more, but it will be understood that even this modification was now relegated to the boy's past, into which it was better not to delve. "A mechanic? A locksmith?" they said later, when they were alone together in their room, bewildered and thoughtful. "A mechanic?" repeated Carolina, weighing the word in the empty air; and Teresa, crushing it down and stamping it into the floor with her foot, once and for all, like some poisonous beast, added: "*Good heavens!*"

For some days there was a mysterious and unusual activity about the house—secret conversations, discussions abruptly broken

off, eloquent silences, an exchange of letters and messages, commissions entrusted to Giselda with carefully sealed papers, and finally an official announcement: on the following Sunday, Santa Maria would have a visit of great importance in no way connected with the usual visits for chemises and drawers, a visit for which even the workroom would be cleared and tidied and the best parlour swept and dusted and opened up to the air and light like a church before a service—with a slight smell of paraffin, too, which had been used for polishing the floor and which increased its more than solemn religious feeling. And finally light refreshments had been prepared with the greatest care and regardless of expense.

Who was it who was to arrive about three o'clock on that bright Sunday at the end of March, when the trembling warmth of spring was already in the air, when the blossom was out on the almond and the apple trees and soft and snowy on the branches of the pear trees, casting a bright veil over all the plain and the hills; and the pungent smell of pink peach blossom already announced the beginning of warmer days; and on the ground were purple anemones and a few red or white ones amongst the young corn?

The midday meal was consumed in a hurry and was served at half-past twelve—half an hour, or even three quarters, before the usual time; and the table was cleared and the room tidied with unusual haste by Giselda, while from the kitchen next door came the clatter of crockery in basins: Niobe, still chewing, was noisily doing the washing up. Everything soon took on an air of religious expectation, as when people are expecting the holy water on a day in Lent.

Remo surveyed all this extraordinary confusion and himself added a pinch of mystery to the surrounding solemnity by preserving his usual imperturbable calm, replying without visible curiosity to his aunts' over-expressive glances and pretending not to notice certain words, spoken or unspoken, certain sibylline remarks which broke off at the critical moment, from which it

transpired that all these unwonted preparations were being made exclusively for his sake.

As soon as they had gulped down their last mouthful, the sisters ran off and shut themselves up in their room, just as they did every Sunday, but this time with different intentions and a new kind of preoccupation. They repeated again to their nephew that he was to put on his blue suit and be ready by three o'clock.

Quite rightly, they had not wanted the boy to put on black after his mother's death, for such signs of mourning are a fragile institution of the middle-class morality that bases everything on forms and appearances; but they had had two suits made for him by a young man at Ponte a Mensola who had been trained under a good tailor in Florence, one of grey flannel and one of a good blue woollen material, both of them with shorts and woollen stockings which showed off his straight, nimble legs, so elegantly formed, and displaying, in movement, a fawn-like grace. He wore a black silk tie and round his left arm a mourning band to impose respect for his situation—an apparent warning more for the benefit of others than of himself, a curb to prevent them from crossing the sentimental boundary by which his affliction was enclosed.

Remo was the first to come down—in fact, it might be said that he had scarcely gone up before he was down again: handsome, elegant, with hair well brushed and glossy, all initiative, all will power well under control as he stood, rocking slightly from one foot to the other, on the third step of the entrance door, like a boat moored to the bank.

Even poor Niobe performed miracles that day, for, a little after two, the kitchen was tidy enough for a military inspection. Then she vanished into her little cubicle next door and emerged again all cleaned and polished up, with every hair in place at the back of her neck and over her ears, and wearing a smart striped apron which scrupulously preserved every line of its folding and which was, indeed, her gala costume.

She came with her broom to where Remo was standing and gave a last little superficial sweeping to the steps and in front of

the door, and then along the paving stones to the iron gate and in front of the gate itself, becoming more and more superficial the farther she went, as if the broom had transformed itself in her hands into a fan. She went on putting the last touches to these exceptional preparations until finally, at the sound of a tram grinding on its rails at a distant bend in the road, she ran to hide her broom in the kitchen, shouted to her mistresses that the tram was on the point of arriving, and then, smoothing down and stroking her apron like a tablecloth on a table, and carefully ordering her jacket like a bird its feathers, came back to the door.

Although the aunts had done their very best, they had still not come downstairs at a few minutes before three. The leisureliness of that Sunday toilet of theirs was a logical compensation for the continuous haste that was required throughout all the rest of their life, a luxury that was the result of feverish activity, a natural reaction. And when the grinding of the tram wheels became audible at the bend of the road nearest to the house, they came rushing down, rustling and sparkling and foaming, powdered and painted and dressed up to the nines. And this made it clear that it was not their efforts upon their own persons that had been interrupted (these had probably been completed some time before), but their satisfied contemplations, from which it had been difficult to tear them away.

Remo, already accustomed to such transformations and to their attire on solemn occasions, no longer looked at them with the interest he had felt when he had travelled in the train with them to Florence, and there would have been so much to admire that day that time would have been the only thing lacking, since the clatter of the tram, which was growing more and more insistent, now came to an abrupt stop a few steps from the gate, where Niobe, gesticulating wildly, was shouting: "The Headmistress! The Headmistress!"

Teresa and Carolina, in all their finery, rushed out to meet their guest.

The first person to get out of the tram was a small girl with a

face as red and round as a medlar fruit; she wore no hat but displayed a very beautiful black coil of hair wound about her small round head, making her look like a girl from a convent school. At first sight, with that figure and that queer little face, she might easily have been taken for a child of fifteen; but a more careful investigation showed her to be much older: she was, in fact, exactly twenty-nine. It was at once obvious that she was a little servant maid—demure, saucy, perhaps pert, certainly fastidious; and as soon as she herself had hopped down from the step on to the ground, she placed herself so as to receive in her outstretched arms, with supreme self-surrender, the person of her mistress. Teresa, too, standing close to the step, opened her arms wide, and so did Carolina, and even Niobe, in the background, made the same gesture. Remo was the only one who stood with his arms at his sides, but he was all ready to bow respectfully before the monumental apparition. The tramcar seemed to gather itself together and then to bow down, to bow lower and lower like a hen laying an egg, in order to give birth to the voluminous figure, all dressed in black.

“Teresa!”

“Beatrice!”

“Carolina!”

As soon as the lady stepped to the ground, “plonk!”—and the earth seemed to quiver, while the tramcar rose several inches and then started off again, lightly and rapidly, on its grinding course.

“How well you’re looking!”

“So are you!”

“And so are you!”

“After so many years!”

“Yes, indeed!”

“What an occasion!”

After they had looked each other over and over and repeated their greetings and their recollections, the group of women went back through the white iron gate, still only half open even when the Headmistress had to pass through it, and still eaten with rust.

Stopping at every other step, and thus bringing to a stop the whole party, over which she spread herself like a broody hen—or rather, let us say, like a turkey, or, better still, like both of them alternately—the Headmistress looked all round, she looked high and she looked low, and near and far, in order to take possession of the whole place again, and, one might have thought, of the very air itself, for she drew long, deep, panting breaths of it, which penetrated far down into her to a spot against which she pressed her hand as though she were pressing a button; and all the time she was making new contact with her friends, grasping their arms, calling them “Children”—first “Children” and then “My children.”

Tonina, the maid, was sent off with Niobe for a walk round the farm. This at once seemed a good idea to her mistress, who answered, looking down from the third step:

“Yes, yes, you can go, run along, my dear, run along . . .”

Then they went into the house.

As the reader will understand, her “yes” was not just an ordinary “yes,” but was carefully weighed, and floated down, from the height at which she stood, accompanied by smiles which ran up and down the scale in the same way as her words, and which made her long, yellow teeth—already much in evidence and full of little holes and notches and dark spots, as though worm-eaten—stick out like bayonets.

They went into the parlour.

The Headmistress looked at the room and seemed anxious to drink it all in, with its church-like light and its paraffin-scented air, all specially prepared for her.

She was two or three years older than the sisters, but, perhaps because of her figure and, even more, because of the imposing manner in which she moved and thrust out her bosom, they, poor things—and especially Carolina—had become, beside her, mere timid little girls; this was due, also, to their affectionate, deferential attitude towards her.

She was made to sit down on the sofa at Teresa’s right hand,

while in one of the two armchairs that flanked it sat Carolina, close to her sister but stretching right out towards their guest, and in the other Remo, beside the Headmistress, who, although she had not yet addressed him, as being the least important person present, had nevertheless bestowed upon him a liberal share of quick, sidelong glances and smiles which signified all sorts of things—such as, for instance, that an interest in him would come all in good time; and gleams of indulgence were already penetrating, in a somewhat pompous manner, through a hedge of authority, like wild roses reaching to the light of day through a hawthorn hedge.

She loosened slightly the cape about her neck, a completely black cape forming part of a long cloak almost like a priest's gown, which, when she flung open her arms, allowed of an ample, imposing gesture; and there was revealed a thin black cord upon which hung her glasses, framed in white metal, slipped in between two buttons of the jacket underneath, at the summit of her bosom. When she began speaking she also pushed back her hat, a kind of funnel, tall and round and entirely black, with bows, feathers, and a veil, which could not be said to be either in fashion or out of it like the ones worn by the Materassis, but merely authoritative. The decision to push it back on her head was taken, certainly, in order to throw into greater relief her large, flat face, furnished with a monumental nose that described a parabola upon it, and with a cork-like skin which had started to become spongy and which, under the microscope, must have shown panoramas of hills and mountains like those in the moon. The curious thing was that this woman, who was called Beatrice, bore a very strong resemblance to Dante and had not even the smallest affinity with his spiritual mistress.

“D'you remember?”

“D'you recollect?”

It turned out that her real friend was Teresa, but that indeed they were both her real friends. The Headmistress was attracted by the confidence (always relative, of course) of Teresa's stronger,

more decided tone—though Teresa, beside that monumental mass, had become a mere newborn calf beside an ox. All Carolina did was to nod her head and to say “Of course” and “Yes” to everything, till she came to resemble a cooing dove; but it was the Headmistress, naturally, who did all the talking, and there was no woman in the world who could have outdone her in putting questions and providing the answers, all on her own, modulating her voice so well that you might have thought she was replying to someone else.

“How many years it is since we met!”

“Who would have thought it?”

“Yes, indeed.”

“No sooner had I read your letter—‘I’m going,’ I said, ‘I’m going myself, I want to go, one Sunday after lunch.’ You know what I mean, my children. I’m in prison just as much as you are; even on Sunday mornings I have to go to my office; there’s the correspondence to be opened and dealt with; there are so many things, I have only these few hours in the afternoon to myself.”

In comparing her own imprisonment with that of the two sisters it must of course be understood that she was making a considerable concession, for hers, as headmistress of an elementary school, was an illustrious prison in contrast with that of the poor chemise and drawers makers.

She was the daughter of a postal employee and had spent her childhood and youth, until she was twenty-three, in a house at Borghetto, between Ponte a Mensola and Santa Maria; she had then started her career as a schoolmistress. Then the family had moved to Florence.

The life of those far-off days was evoked again: the Materassi family, the Squilloni family, to which the Headmistress belonged. They recalled country expeditions together into the hills, evenings spent at one house or the other, and one famous game of blind man’s buff in which Carolina had pulled off the bandage without even trying to hit the earthenware pot, without daring to take a single step once the bandage was over her eyes, because she was

too frightened. Teresa, on the contrary, had taken the necessary steps, but had gone all crooked, and had hit the air instead of the pot.

“Ha! Ha! Ha!”

“Ha! Ha! Ha!”

“Ha! Ha! Ha!”

At last the turn of the future headmistress had come, for, as she was in her own home, she had to be the last to make the attempt. She had walked quite freely to the right spot, just below the pot, as though she had had no bandage over her eyes, and then, taking a good swipe, had hit it such a blow in the belly that the whole lot of sweets and chocolates had come raining down—and without any of the bits of the broken pot falling on her.

“Ha! Ha! Ha!”

“Ha! Ha! Ha!”

“Ha! Ha! Ha!”

Figures of the past were recalled—their parents, their grandparents, all the Materassis, all the Squillonis: all dead.

“Ah!”

“Oh!”

“Well, well.”

And after the gay moments, which were few, they recalled the sorrows, which were many, and the disasters and misfortunes, very many indeed, outnumbering them all.

“Well, well, well . . .”

“Eh . . .”

“But . . .”

Then the house was recalled.

“Would you like to see it again?”

Bowing her head, but remaining alert and watchful, the Head-mistress gave no answer.

“Would you like to see it again? We could go round by the field and no one would see us.”

Drawing herself up but with head still lowered, moving in a yielding, resilient sort of way, she let fall a succession of noes:

“No . . . no, no . . . no, no . . . no” on a long scale, so that they seemed to fall all down her dress, from which she brushed them away mechanically with her hand, as though she wanted to get rid of a scrap of rubbish or a thread or a grain of dust.

No, she did not want to see it again; but it must be understood, of course, that this detached attitude of hers did not mean indifference.

“No . . . I came past here two years ago; I was at Settignano for the examinations, as a member of the Board.”

“Why didn’t you stop?”

“I was not alone; I was with the Inspector.”

Remo had not opened his mouth, maintaining an exemplary composure and courtesy. Amidst all these sighs and smiles, these peals of laughter, these reminiscences, the one thing he had noticed was that the teeth of the Headmistress set off to advantage those of his two aunts; and he had remarked that, when they stopped laughing to turn from a gay to a melancholy subject, the teeth of all three of them had remained outside their mouths, just as if they had forgotten to pull them back again; so that there was no knowing, with those faces that had gone all serious, whether they had not left them outside in order to bite.

Really! Really!

This odd boy, who had been able to see, without any hesitation, that he had fallen in a lucky spot amongst all those chemises and drawers, had, however, already understood another important, essential thing—that these elderly equine females, even when they showed their teeth or left them forgetfully outside their mouths, did *not* do this in order to bite; and so, whether they were munching their corn or opening their mouths to neigh, he remained perfectly calm. Nor was he troubled by their increasing number, but showed himself delighted that such an increase should occur.

They were discussing memories of their love life.

“What can you expect, we women . . . ? You’ll understand . . .”

The two sisters, one with her voice, the other with her eyes,

said simultaneously: "We've never known anything except work . . . and here we are."

When it came to the point of having to talk about it to a third person, the strong, fierce band of Alfredos and Gaetanos, Raffaeles and Guglielmos, with all their inestimable merits and absurd failings, vanished like a handful of cowards at the first smell of powder.

"Yes, I know . . . I know . . ."

The Headmistress had heard of their skill, their success, and was aware of their well-deserved fortune.

"It's wonderful, it's splendid, I know you're most remarkable." Not as remarkable as herself, however. "You know who I was talking with not long ago about you? You remember Bettina Risaliti, now Tirinnanzi? She used to come often to see us on Sundays in the summer. . . . She has grown-up children—they were all my pupils—three boys and a girl who's going to get married in May; and when we were talking about her trousseau your name was mentioned, but she said you were too grand for her, she couldn't afford to come to you."

"Ah! Ah!"

The Materassis did not remember Bettina Risaliti, nor did they know that she was now called Tirinnanzi and was the wife of an almost famous pork butcher; but at the recognition of their own status they modestly hung their heads. Work had cut them off from everything, they concluded, and had even deprived them of the memory of a great number of things. They were seamstresses, embroiderers, that was all; and so they would die.

"Too late now . . ."

This "too late now," however, was not definite and final, judging by the way in which it was pronounced; for anyone who understands the shades and subtleties of language there was, at the bottom of it, a tiny gleam of light which might perhaps become larger; and the moment they realized this they became unwilling to admit the truth, which was that their lives would certainly end in that manner, that the possibilities of changing

them were there at hand but that they would reject them all; the “too late now” was a result of their own wishes; they had exiled themselves voluntarily from life, and that little gleam of light would remain exactly as it was.

The Headmistress’s life story, on the other hand, contained a highly coloured drama. She had been abandoned, a few days before her wedding, by a young schoolmaster, her colleague, who had disappeared, leaving her with her trousseau all ready and all the arrangements made. Nor had she ever been able to discover the true reason of her betrayer’s unexpected desertion. But, since the sisters knew all about this drama which had taken place thirty years before, towards the end of the time when she had lived on the Settignano road, there was little she could add to it now.

“You remember, eh?” she said, softening that commanding voice and nodding her head up and down, and looking at Teresa with a momentary abandonment, of which, nevertheless, one felt she was in full control, and which might change back into her severe manner at the mere movement of an eyebrow. But no, not at all, having once ventured on to soft and slippery ground, the dear lady wanted to go on sliding about for a little.

“All too well!” answered Teresa.

“Goodness gracious!” added Carolina.

“He’s in Rome now, a director of instruction.”

That was the explanation of the providential, albeit tragic, flight. A headmaster and a headmistress! Could such a thing be possible? Can you see two Napoleons living together? It would be a monstrous thing, inhuman, crazy, not even amusing.

“Have you never seen him since?” Teresa hazarded, a vision of the departing fugitive in her mind’s eye.

“Yes, once, in Florence, five years ago. He was here for some days because of his mother’s death. I met him in the street; he is much changed, almost unrecognizable, his hair is quite white. It was my blood that made me recognize him; I felt it all go up, and then all go down again.” She shook all over, and then, unexpectedly, fired up. “But I passed him with my head in the air.”

And she raised her head just in the way Napoleon did when things were going badly.

“And yet . . . what d’you expect . . . ?”

Teresa’s half-expressed feeling was toying vaguely with the idea of a possible, if tardy, reparation.

“But he’s married!” shouted the Headmistress, resuming her manner as such, and depriving Teresa of all possibility of proceeding. “He’s married,” she enunciated, opening her mouth and her eyes so that her words should be like circles becoming larger and larger as they left her lips, enveloping and engulfing her companion; “eight children, eight, eight—d’you see?”

From all four sides of the room came the confirmation of the number: “Eight! Eight! Eight! Eight!”

If Niobe had been there, she would have exclaimed: “Good luck to him!” And if respect and awe of the Headmistress had imposed silence upon her, she would have said: “Good luck to him!” just the same, with her head, with her shoulders, with her arms, with her hands, with one of her feet; no headmistress in the world could have prevented her. For simple people have no need of their mouths in order to speak; and nothing delighted her more than those who produce offspring without any sense of economy: “Eight children!”

Teresa and Carolina looked at their friend in a bewildered, troubled way, and then looked at each other without knowing what further to say.

“Eight children.”

All the visceral pangs that that cruel man had spared her, by his ignominious flight, had gone to her brain and turned her into a tyrant. There you have another useful explanation.

After this intermezzo by the violins, with its final breaking of strings, they came back to the present, to the journey to Ancona and the forty-eight tunnels: “Poor Augusta! Ah! Ah!”

The Headmistress did not remember Augusta, who must have been a child at the time of her friendship with the two sisters; she did not remember her, nor did she hesitate to say so. They

described the poor woman's death, and their return with their nephew, until finally all the looks and smiles of the three women were concentrated upon him. Voices were lowered when it had to be confessed that a boy of fourteen, physically so vigorous, did not possess the elementary certificate and had only just got into the third class. And here the Headmistress outsoared all heights, both her own giddy heights and those of this rather embarrassing case. She allowed the sisters to talk in their subdued, shamefaced, frightened manner, while she herself manoeuvred the imposing funnel on her head, nodding majestically, as much as to say that all this shame and fear were more than justified, were in fact her due; then she turned towards the guilty boy, at first frowning, then beginning gradually to give faint smiles which had in them all the impenetrable mysteries, all the secrets, all the charms of authority, and in which the boy could read all judgments, all comments, all reproofs, and also all promises; and then finally she broke into peals of laughter, of her own magisterial kind—loud peals and soft peals, loud peals that ended by being soft, soft peals that gradually became louder, peals that died away and were then resumed; and she beat her fist on her knees and pushed the symbol of her authority even farther back on her head, until the sisters were struck dumb with astonishment.

The Headmistress wished to know his name.

"Remo, good, I like the name Remo, excellent, better Remus than Romulus, who, although he founded Rome, killed his brother. Rome ought to have been founded without killing anybody, it would have been much better. Don't you think so?" she concluded.

"Yes, yes," said the sisters, and sat listening, for certainly history was not their strong point, and, as for Remo, we know quite well by now how far *his* scholastic attainments had progressed. And then, like a champion who descends into the arena sure of his own strength and valour and begins, quite naturally, to show off those limbs with which he is about to perform a prodigy in front of the astonished crowds: "Ah!" she said. "You, young sir,

fourteen years old, and tall and strong, you haven't yet got your elementary certificate, and aren't you ashamed of yourself? And you actually dare to stand there in front of *me*?" The Headmistress laughed and laughed again. The most astonishing thing of all was that Remo, in face of this artillery fire, remained quite imperturbable, with a gleam of white teeth between lip and lip, exactly as he did when he had just arrived at Santa Maria and, looking round, saw nothing but chemises and drawers. Intelligent boy that he was, he had then understood the integral parts, and now he understood the species.

The Headmistress's laughter died away in coils and convulsions, and its significance had been quite different from what her friends perhaps supposed. What caused them so much fear and shame was, to her, merely a matter for laughter, and for hearty laughter, since it was a question of ordinary administration. To give Remo an elementary certificate was, to her, like eating a lump of sugar to an elephant.

Last October she had given an elementary certificate to a young man of twenty-nine, and to others of twenty-four, twenty-six, twenty, and eighteen; it was a thing that happened every day, and some years before she had given it to an old man of sixty-three: "sixty-three," she repeated, so that they should grasp what she was saying and not be ashamed any more. A gentleman who was meticulous about formalities had refused to take him on as a porter without this document. In the written exam the poor man, together with the other pupils, had had to write a composition on this theme: "Little Peter, when going for a walk with his mamma, is present at a moving scene"; and he had acquitted himself almost too well. But, for the oral examination, she had drawn up her own plan, which she guarded jealously at her own exalted level and of which she was very proud. When the candidate came before the Board, and—since he suffered slightly from gout—was walking rather crookedly, the members of the Board looked at each other in surprise, not knowing what to question

him about nor where to begin. "History, history," prompted the Headmistress, with the freshness of water spurting from a spring. "History," she repeated, as though she were still in front of the Board. It was a resounding success. The good man had been behind the carriage that bore Canapone¹ away when he left Florence on April 27, 1859. He was amongst the young men who shouted after him: "Go on! Get out! Go away from here! Get out!" All along the Via Bolognese. And Canapone had answered: "Can't you see I'm going? What else am I doing? What d'you think? You can see what I'm doing. Here I am, I'm going away, I'm going away, so now you'll be content!" And they followed him closely, leaping and dancing round the carriage, and shouting: "Get out! Get out!" While the reactionary women greeted him from the windows, weeping and crying: "Poor Leopold! Poor Daddy! See you again soon." "Soon, soon," replied the Grand Duke, saluting them; but when he looked round he tightened his lips. "Perhaps, but I don't believe it. . . . It may be, but I don't think you'll see me again. . . ." And later, when the old man said he had met Victor Emmanuel and shaken hands with Giuseppe Garibaldi, the Board jumped to their feet and gave him his certificate *cum laude*.

At this point the Headmistress was silent, and she sat looking away into the distance, farther and farther . . . and not just to the other end of the room, for her gaze was not confined by any walls. And truly, when she tucked in her teeth—not completely, for her mouth was not capable of containing them—when she half closed her eyes and looked far, far away . . . she was no longer the headmistress of an elementary school, and there was indeed no knowing where her sphere of action began nor where it might end. Then, drumming her fingers on her thigh, she started to calculate:

"April, May, June . . . There's plenty of time." And then she mentioned a name: "Calliope, Calliope Bonciani—d'you remember Calliope?" The poor things didn't remember Calliope either,

¹Leopold, last Grand Duke of Tuscany.

but they said "Yes, yes," pretending that they remembered her in a vague sort of way.

"She always used to come to Il Borghetto with her mother. She's had her pension now for some years, and her mother is still alive—ninety-two," she enunciated slowly, for the Headmistress always announced numbers in conversation as items of exceptional value. "Ninety-two," she declared even more forcibly.

It was a pity that Niobe was going round the farm with Tonina, for no one could have stopped her exclaiming, at the mention of this number: "Ah, the old hussy!" Life was so beautiful that she could never restrain a cry of pleasure and sympathy for those who recklessly suck the last drop from it.

Calliope was another flower—in fact, the finest flower of the bunch. The reason for which she had remained unmarried redounded very greatly to her credit. She had lost her fiancé in the cholera plague in Naples in 1884, this having broken out while he was doing his military service in that city. Having spared no efforts to help in this dreadful epidemic, he himself had fallen a victim to his own charitable duty. Calliope, young and beautiful, refused to think of giving her heart to any other man, and, like so many lovely, romantic creatures of the last century, insisted on remaining faithful to him beyond the grave. On her chest of drawers stood a handsome portrait of the young man in his *bersagliere* uniform, wearing the hat with its sumptuous plumes falling right down to his shoulders. In front of it there were always flowers and a little lamp.

"Ninety-two!" The Headmistress repeated yet again the age of Calliope's mother. "If you could see her walking! Why, she's a wonder! They are quite comfortably off, but of course it's always convenient to earn a little something, and besides, Calliope has nothing to do. What a splendid schoolmistress she was! Always with the boys, and in the higher classes: she used to take the fifth, just as I did."

Even though she had never become a headmistress, Calliope had earned her full esteem. She added that the best teachers are

always to be found with the boys, and in the higher classes—the fifth! Like herself and Calliope. Carolina tremblingly ventured: “Are boys better than girls?”

The Headmistress rolled her eyes in a knowing way. That was Niobe’s opinion. Even though the male sex had left her with a little unpaid bill, they were still always better than females. She said that with boys you always know what they want, and when they get into mischief you know how and why they do it; they are lively, noisy, turbulent, often absolute demons, but they are open and you can see right into them without difficulty; you know what their feelings are, and if you know how to take them you can do what you like with them. Girls, on the other hand, are quieter, more respectful, more composed, more obedient, but often they are saving up some little thing for themselves, and they may play a trick on you that you didn’t expect; with girls, you never know what’s going on inside them; you think you know all about them, and then, in the end, you discover that you know nothing at all.

My poor ladies, you will never find another woman to be the apologist for your sex!

“Well, then, April, May, June . . . Two hours every morning . . .” And she turned towards Remo, throwing back her head and holding up her hand. “But you will have to work hard, you will have to make up for lost time and repair deficiencies,” she concluded severely.

The problem having been so simply solved, Teresa and Carolina, relieved of the burden which had been oppressing them for many days, jumped up simultaneously and ran across to the table upon which, in a dark corner, the refreshments had been put ready. First they offered a glass of orangeade to the Headmistress, who, when the sisters had moved to the table, had taken her glasses from the front of her jacket and put them on, wishing to see clearly what she was about to swallow; then they gave her some Vino Santo of 1907 (this was in 1919) with little biscuits and very thin slices of bread and butter.

The Headmistress showed herself greatly pleased at this courtesy and accepted, with abundant and varied smiles, the Vino Santo and the biscuits; and, having once seen what she was being given, she quickly slipped her glasses back into her jacket and fell to, without further examination. When the moment came to say she had had enough, her refusals were accompanied by a wide gesture of the arms and a throwing back of the head. "No, no, it's impossible." At this point Remo intervened, in an attempt to overcome her denials and reluctances. He went and fetched a tray from the table, carefully and with no sign of timidity, and then presented it to the Headmistress, who threw herself back on the sofa so that all the feathers stood up on the top of her head at the same moment, like those of a cock faced by its rival, and then opened her eyes very wide and her mouth also, showing all her teeth, as if to devour the audacious boy. But he, by now, was not afraid of being bitten; he understood the character of these horse-like old women and stood his ground. "Ah! You dare to offer a biscuit to the Headmistress who has already said no so many times to your aunts? You dare to be so bold?" Then, altering the offended expression of her face, with the mouth wide open to devour the offender, she appeared to spit out her teeth (being unable, from joy, to keep them in) so as to form a smile; and she yielded and smiled again and ended by devouring the biscuit. Yes, indeed, from *him* she was willing to take another biscuit, but not from her friends—from them, nothing; but from *him* she took it and swallowed it. This game was repeated several times, and each time with an even greater show of being offended, and an even more expansive capitulation. And she even allowed him to pour her out another tiny drop of wine, after having told her friends that it would be bad for her. But they, instead of being jealous, were radiant at their nephew's success. Another tiny drop from the future candidate for an elementary certificate, and another little biscuit. He had got round her all right, the little male! And Remo, as he offered her these things, showed no sign whatever of being embarrassed or supplicating—not in the least!

He presented them with assurance, as if taking her acceptance for granted, though he realized that it was necessary to be patient, and remained unaffected by the scene of exaggerated astonishment by which that acceptance was preceded.

One of these little scenes was interrupted by the appearance of Niobe, together with Tonina, in the doorway. Niobe's face, too, lit up at the sight of all this gaiety, and she saw that everything was going as well as it possibly could and that the Headmistress had not come to Santa Maria in vain; while Tonina, all confused and excited, kept repeating: "Signora, signora, do look, do please look!" Her arms were laden, as also were Niobe's, with flowers, fruit, lettuces, endive, chicory, lamb's lettuce—everything the Headmistress liked (and some little things that Tonina also liked, probably; and what had she not liked, during this visit?): seeds and plants for her little garden, and branches too—yes, indeed, for she liked branches very much, and placed them in her bedroom, on the chest of drawers, while she had flowers in her dining room. The astute Niobe had wormed out all these secrets from Tonina and had smothered her with all the things that might prove agreeable to her august mistress.

It was, of course, understood that this was a mere sample, a foretaste, and that the Headmistress would see things of this kind—and much better, probably—arriving at her house, and that she would have something to keep her mouth fresh and sweet all through the spring and summer.

For the second time she extracted her eyeglasses from her jacket and put them on, halfway down her monumental nose: she wished to see what she was carrying off with her, and meanwhile started uttering exclamations of wonder and protest, while Tonina repeated: "I didn't want it, but she *would* give it to me."

The whole party, on the way out, stopped in the workroom, which was so tidy as to be almost unrecognizable, with the pieces of material neatly piled up and arranged on the tables, and the embroidery frames with their faces to the wall.

The Headmistress wanted to see some of their work.

"Everyone knows that you have golden fingers. And the whole world knows, too, what wonderful people you are. . . ."

Teresa showed her a few chemises, drawers, and combinations which formed part of the trousseau of a young *contessina* who was getting married in the following April, and then those of a baroness who was very handsome but no longer young.

The Headmistress, who, while admiring the trousseau of the Contessina, had gone into ecstasies at the exquisiteness of the work, when she came to the baroness was unable to contain herself any longer and burst out in surprise at the dimensions, hitherto unsuspected by her, of these drawers and chemises. Was this, then, the underclothing that women wore?

Teresa, who had remained diffident and subdued until that moment, now, in front of her own productions, smiled without answering, not even accepting the question as worth discussion. It was she, now, who was the one in authority, and, with an air of courteous, indulgent self-assurance, she allowed the other woman to bring forward her complaints, by no means averse to a return match.

But Carolina, more ingenuous, broke in:

"And they're steadily getting smaller, shorter and shorter and more and more skimpy, because, you see, with the clothes they wear now, the underclothes have got to be reduced to nothing, they've got to be made to disappear altogether."

"Ah! Even shorter? Really! So this is the underclothing of the modern woman? Really! Splendid! Shameless hussies! Ridiculous, obscene creatures!" She croaked out a satanic laugh when she noticed that the baroness's drawers were much wider than they were long. One realized that, beneath her own priest-like gown, there must be a pair of long, monkish pants, in the fashion of thirty years before—some of those left intact from her own trousseau, owing to that fatal desertion, and coming right down to her ankles, with embroidered frills.

At this point she felt anxious to save her friends from the tortures they must be suffering, by laying the blame entirely on the

modern woman and on the madmen who create the fashions.

"You poor dears, it's not *your* fault, I know that, not your fault at all. You're doing quite rightly, you've got to do this, it's your profession, of course. . . . But if I were the husband of one of those women and my wife let me see her in garments like that, I'd take a stick to her. . . ." And she made the gesture of giving someone a good smack.

She was no clairvoyant, the Headmistress; it was probably not a stick that was used in such circumstances.

Teresa had given Carolina a wink, as a sign to cut short this conversation, and she, running over to the cupboard, brought out a chasuble, the design of which had already been worked out and the embroidery begun, and over which their friend went into ecstasies of delight. Then she showed her a black shawl upon which she was embroidering a design taken from a Chinese original, at which she worked only from time to time because, although well paid, the amount she made was scarcely a just reward for the incalculable labour involved. The Headmistress showed a curiosity for solid facts.

"How much do you get for work like that?"

"I've asked three thousand lire and they haven't refused."

"And how long will you take to finish it?"

"Three months, perhaps, if I worked at it without interruption, but in the way I'm doing it . . . a year, at least."

When she reached the threshold and was standing at the top of the steps, she turned to Remo and raised a warning hand. "If you marry a wife who wears such short chemises and drawers, throw her out, or take a stick to her."

Remo smiled at her, poor woman. And it was the last mistake she made that day.

This exceptional Sunday was crowned by an extraordinary decision. Since Remo was to begin lessons at once with Signorina Calliope, it was decided to buy him a bicycle so that he might get there quickly; for this it would be indispensable.

They determined to go to Florence, all three of them, next

morning—a plan which amazed the entire neighbourhood, as though it were a matter of sentries who had gone mad and deserted their posts—Remo having assured them that he understood about bicycles and knew which was the make to be preferred.

And then a very curious little thing occurred: Remo knew the city to perfection; but since he could not ever have been there because nobody had ever thought of taking him, he made a great effort that this should not be noticed. His aunts took him where they thought best, whereas he himself knew perfectly well which was the right place to go to find the bicycle he wanted; until at last he contrived to get them to the exact spot, as if by chance, without their noticing.

Then they stopped at a large *café* for chocolate and brioches. Remo was wheeling his beautiful bicycle, which still lacked its sacramental licence stamp, and was looking at it all the time with the complacency of a lover. And when the aunts had got into the Settignano tram he, mounted on his machine (even though it lacked its stamp), rode along beside it, then overtook it, then let it go on ahead and caught up with it again, to the immense and ill-concealed delight of his aunts, who followed him as he rode lightly and skilfully amongst the people, happy to be travelling with this charming escort. And whenever the tram stopped he would perform evolutions all round it as he waited for it to go on, or he would stop too, resting his hand against the window right behind Carolina's shoulders; at which imaginary contact she would start wriggling all over, unable to contain her bliss, and would then, in order to hide it, tell her sister that she was trembling for fear of a prosecution. But Remo's eyes were sharp enough even to get away with an unlicensed bicycle.

Little by little Teresa, without noticing it, had acquired the habit—which soon became an irresistible craze—of introducing her nephew to people, more especially to her distinguished clients, earning applause and sympathy from everyone, both on account of her noble action and because of the good impression

Remo made; and indeed, in that grey flannel suit, he looked extremely smart; with his well-brushed, glossy hair, he was never put out, even amongst noise and confusion, he knew how to keep his head in any situation, and he could be shown off with the certainty of giving satisfaction. She would relate the misfortune that had happened to the poor boy, and would take the blame herself for his not being dressed in mourning for his mother. The ladies would pay compliments both to the generous aunts and to the promising youth, and the pious ones—without even looking at him—would commend the good action they were performing, for which the Lord would reward them in another life.

When her nephew gazed lingeringly at her, Teresa had to turn away her eyes as though avoiding a question; Carolina, on the other hand, would be assailed by an impulse which she could not resist, and would end by embracing and kissing him violently—which threw her into confusion, for some reason that she could never understand: she would feel quite giddy and go hot and cold all over. One must reflect that this fifty-year-old spinster was, for the first time in her life, kissing a man—even if only an adolescent; up till that moment she had kissed only boys very much younger than he, children of five or six, and her kiss expressed all the innocence and sweetness of her virgin state. She would have been horrified if anyone had explained to her the remote, confused origins of her agitation.

Teresa did not conceal her irritation at this act, several times repeated, which, for some reason she could not explain, she considered altogether excessive. But Remo appeared to do all he could to contrive a meeting with her alone in the half-darkness of the staircase. He hung about in the dim light when she might be expected to go past, he followed her at a distance, until at last, on one occasion, when he had made her feel that his eyes were upon her in spite of the gloom, she took hold of him, clasped him to her, and gave him a long, warm kiss. The boy surrendered his mouth to her as though it were not a part of himself. But she, after the kiss, went and shut herself up in her room in

a state of extreme agitation, nor did she ever again allow such a desire to arise in her, a desire that she ought to have kept concealed. She wondered, in fact, whether she ought not to speak of the matter in confession, but she never mentioned it, nor did she ever again become irritated when Carolina, yielding to the impulses of her heart, kissed her nephew in front of everybody. Remo, however, remembering the place and the occasion, again managed, with surprising cleverness, to meet her alone at the darkest part of the staircase—which, for her, amounted to a re-proof rather than an act of love.

And so the winter and the spring passed in the house of the aunts.

Niobe, in the meantime, had been receiving a certain number of complaints from the neighbours. Another of Remo's accomplishments was coming to light: he knew how to use his fists with superlative force and dexterity. What made this phenomenon even more remarkable was that, while his opponent wore himself out with anger and rage, he himself not merely remained calm and indifferent and showed complete self-control, but would smile at him as though he had been showering caresses upon him or offering him sweets to suck. The shrewder the blow, the more quietly would he smile—which augmented the fury of his rival, and also of his rival's relations who had begun to notice what was happening.

The mothers of the neighbourhood, the grandmothers, the sisters, the aunts, before speaking about this to the mistresses of the house, of whom they stood in awe, spoke of it to Niobe, coming across the field to the kitchen door without being seen.

“His eye’s closed up.”

“He can’t move one of his arms.”

“His cheek’s all swollen.”

“He’s covered with bruises.”

“He’s got a tooth loose.”

“He knocked him about so much that he’s started coughing, poor boy; he had the pleurisy two years ago.”

In fact, Augusta's little boy, or rather the *signorino*, the young gentleman, as they ought to say, as they were supposed to say—but they said it in the wrong kind of way, teasingly, ironically, angrily; and some even added, the Young Duke, the Heir—was leading them all a dance.

And then finally, one day, Remo, who had always been accustomed to appear composedly and punctually at mealtimes, arrived with a prodigious black eye, livid and unequivocal, obvious evidence of a set-to in the grand manner. But he carried it off so well, and with such self-possession, that he might not have had it at all, and they had to draw his attention to it.

Palle

PALLE! Palle! Palle! Hi, Palle! Come here, Palle!"

In the neighbourhood of Santa Maria it was often possible to hear this name being called very persistently and with a certain urgency. It was a name that did not belong to any official personage, nor, certainly, to anyone very talkative, nor indeed to anyone in a position so eminent as to deserve all that amount of interest; and the curious thing was that the person in question responded to the interest taken in him with, on his side, the least possible eagerness and even less urgency: nine times out of ten not merely did he not deign to answer at all, but did not even look round, and people had to run after him in order to speak to him. "Blast Palle! That cursed Palle!"

Palle was one of those nicknames, or extra names, made use of by the working class, both in town and country, to make people seem more vivid and picturesque, more understandable than under their baptismal names; and this with the full approval of the person who has been thus rebaptized, who would certainly refrain from taking offence at such an exchange, for he himself never knows when the name was given him nor by whom. It was not, in fact, given him for no reason; it is his real name—and everyone knows when and by whom that was given him—which

sticks to him so insecurely, like a label that becomes more and more faded and worn, that is on the point of falling off its jar or its bottle, that will not stay on but has to be hastily replaced from time to time with a lick of the tongue. In the case of the second name, on the other hand, it is he himself who, at a certain indefinable moment, gives birth to it; it sprouts from him like a flower from a plant, it has its root in the depths of his being; and even if, as in this case, it has no meaning, it still has far more meaning than the real name, and he will never get rid of it; and even if it belittles or exposes him, as often happens, even if it draws attention to physical defects or failings or bad habits, he cannot take offence. If he takes a fancy to it, it will take the place of the first name in a far shorter time than by letting things take their own course. It is a custom which does not show any lack of piety in the working class, but rather a greater courage in facing life and a lesser degree of hypocrisy, offering a wider fellowship in face of reality.

Palle was a rather short young man—small, even, one might say—but so broad and powerful in the shoulders, so massive, that he had an imposing quality of his own. His hands were broad and thick, his legs short and a trifle crooked, not shaped like an X, which is a sign of weakness, but bent outwards—bandy legs, as they are called—and extremely strong; he moved in a careless sort of way, swaying as he walked.

If he was not making use of them, he kept his hands in his pockets. He wore a cap with the peak pulled well down over his forehead, and there were very few eventualities that could make him take it off. Nobody could have succeeded in making him wear a hat, which he would have considered to be, on his own head, nothing but an object of ridicule, as an overcoat would have been on his body; he would have laughed heartily at the idea. Beneath that cap peak were two bright—two extremely bright—eyes, both cunning and good-natured; and, entirely hidden inside the cap, his hair, thick and fair, showed by its lack of gloss and its rather dry look that it was either very hastily at-

tended to or easily forgotten. Although his pale face looked beardless in spite of his twenty-two years, a few fine specks of gold would sometimes catch the light round his mouth when he broke into a smile which, like his eyes, was good-natured and cunning at the same time. But the prevailing impression that his figure gave was one of physical strength and manly self-possession, even if that swaying walk of his, disguising, as it did, his energy and activity, made him appear indolent. If anyone had called him Belisario, which was his real name, he would quite certainly not have answered, and it would have required an effort to make him remember it.

“Palle! Palle! Listen, Palle! Come here, Palle!”

It was especially round about the Materassis’ house that these remarks and this name could be heard; a head would be poked out of a door, a figure would appear at a window, someone would chase the young man for two or three steps outside the iron gate, in the road; and all this with such urgency that you would have thought the person being urged or wanted must be running away. But not at all; he was not even thinking of that; he was neither running nor was he answering the summons; but he would stop and bow his shoulders to listen, with a look of wanting to get away and of already knowing what they wanted to tell him or were in process of telling him, resisting the excitements and irritations of the women by the force of his own solidity.

When Remo, eight years before, as a boy, not long after his arrival at Santa Maria, had come home one day with a visible black eye and a number of hidden bruises that he took good care not to show, no one ever knew—even though the aunts had opened a strict inquest—that all this havoc had been caused by the thick, broad hands of Palle, who was also fourteen years old at the time. Nor was Palle’s mother ever able to discover the origin of certain bruises with which her son had come home one evening and which he had been anxious to conceal as much as possible; for it certainly must not be imagined that he returned clean and fresh after what had happened. But, just as though

there had been a solemn understanding between the two youths, they both of them, by sheer force of character, had concealed both the causes and the consequences of a formidable contest of which nobody had been a spectator.

As we have already seen, Remo, being new to the neighbourhood, had encountered the hostility and mistrust naturally shown towards one who, instead of resigning himself to an inferior position, had actually wished to impose himself; and he had had differences of opinion, for the most futile reasons, with all his contemporaries, one at a time, and had given and taken blows. The bomb was ready to explode. Niobe was incapable of stemming the tide of discontent produced by the boy's presence—of which his aunts were completely ignorant, since in the house, and in front of them, he maintained the correct, self-possessed attitude of a well-brought-up adult; and it must be added, too, that they would have raised up their heads like a couple of vipers if anyone had gone and made complaints to them or spoken evil of him.

But Palle lay in wait for the stranger, seeking an occasion to make him feel the force of a pair of Santa Maria fists; in his, he felt, lay the justice and honour of the village, and the moment such an occasion arose he did not allow it to escape him: the agile, elegant Remo and his short, strong rival attacked each other violently, and, for the first time, Remo not only gave but received blows. And since the policy of both of them, without the other knowing it, was to keep silent, there arose in their minds next day, simultaneously, the desire to see each other again, and they sought each other out, remaining at first, both of them, gloomy and threatening, without opening their mouths, just as though the scuffle might start again at any moment; but it was the gloom of a rain-laden cloud which is about to burst, and with it, when it did burst, went the darkness and the mutterings that hang in the sky after a storm has passed, until finally, like a rainbow, a laugh of genuine liking broke out on both sides. The two champions were already attracted to one another. From their

trial of strength had been born a mutual liking and esteem, and from these an understanding and a friendship arose which put a stop to any possible rivalry or rancour.

From that day onwards they always sought each other out, not desiring the company of anyone else, avoiding it purposely, in fact, being sufficient to themselves and showing it without any excuses.

It must be said at once that the aunts did not show themselves at all gratified by his choice—quite the contrary, indeed. Palle was not one of their tenants and he belonged to the poorest class; he lived not far off, with his mother, in an extremely humble house. They had just one ground-floor room with a poky little hole that served as a kitchen, and they were allowed to live there more or less out of charity. The mother was the widow of a carter who had died of pneumonia, and she went to do the washing at the Umberto I Institute for the education of children who were backward, mentally deficient, or half-witted; and there they gave her, in addition to a very small wage, her midday meal. When she came home in the evening she would start making the soup that served as sustenance for herself and her son, part of which she put aside in a smaller pot for the next day, when she herself was at her washing. From the Institute she used to bring back leftover bread, bits and pieces for making her soups, remains of food that the sisters gave her, fruit that was not very good, and vegetable peelings.

Lean and wiry, showing, in her measured movements, every tendon in her body, she looked like some old draught horse whose limbs have been reduced by hard work to nothing but timber and rope.

Palle loved his mother with a religious love. She could have ordered him to lay down his life and he would not have hesitated for an instant, without asking either her or himself the reason why; she could have hit him in front of everyone, and he would neither have tried to escape nor have given any sign of resistance. He would listen with the numbed reverence of an

ascetic to the few words that issued from the lips of this rough, ignorant woman.

The mother never gave utterance to a word of exhortation towards her son, nor of reproof, nor of advice, nor did she ever scold him—partly owing to his goodness of heart, and partly to her own; nor did she ever feel herself impelled to any gesture of tenderness, to a caress, a kiss, a compliment, or a soft look; she loved him with a force for which silence is the strongest form of expression. Without judging him she felt that he was perfect, that he was incapable of malice or unfairness, of hurting or of telling lies, and she would have been fierce in his defence if he had been attacked.

With hands in pockets and head swaying from side to side, Palle used often to go in the evening to the gate of the Institute to wait for her when she came from her work. If she had a bundle he took it from her, and, without any greeting exchanged or a single word spoken, started walking along beside her, looking down on the ground and swaying his body as if he were looking for something; while his mother thrust her head out and pressed heavily forward from her hips like the old, tired horse she was. When they reached home she lit the fire, while he sat at the little table propped against the wall and, still wearing his cap, followed her every movement, getting up to hand her something without her asking him or thanking him in any way; they exchanged monosyllables rather than words, or muttered a few habitual remarks, until, at the right moment, he would place their two bowls on the table, with a spoon and a glass beside each, take the bread out of the cupboard, and go and fill the bottle at the public fountain; then they sat down facing each other and ate their meal together. In good weather Palle would go out again for a short time while his mother tidied up indoors, and in the winter they went to bed at once, undressing beside the two small white beds between which there was only a narrow gap, just wide enough for remaking them; they undressed at the sides, right against the wall, looking forward to the sound repose of

the just, these two destitute creatures; and they performed the act of lying down to sleep with the simplicity and frankness of which only angels and beasts are capable.

During the day Palle used to wander round the neighbourhood without making friends with anybody, without mixing with other people, looking at other boys playing without envying them or joining in their fun; poverty had given him sense in advance of his years, and amongst those of his own age who were better off and who could afford the luxury of remaining children for a longer time, he was already, precociously, a man. You could see him appear on the main road, at the corner of the lane that led to his own home, like a hare popping out of the hedge, and then, in the same way as he had come, disappearing again, before you could see what he was doing. He was badly dressed, generally in other people's castoff clothes, with jackets too big or too small for him, that had been roughly altered; and heavy, muddy, hob-nailed shoes. Every now and then, at no particular time, he would go home, open the cupboard, cut himself a slice of bread, pour a few drops of oil and vinegar on it, and sprinkle it with a little salt; or there might be a little piece of tunny fish, or a sardine, or a slice of *mortadella* sausage to eat with it, or he would finish the last spoonfuls of soup left in the pot; then he would go and drink at the fountain. This was the way in which he had been brought up. He had been incapable of serious study; with an immense effort, and an even greater indulgence, he had managed to achieve a third-class certificate; but he could not write, and, when faced with a printed page, could only fix his attention upon it for a very short time, and his eyes and mouth betrayed the difficulty and the chaotic bewilderment in which the words placed him. It was not from ill nature or ill will that he had been able to learn nothing, but from an inborn crudity, an impossibility of nature; for he was the son of two illiterates, of people who scarcely knew how to talk. His mother had never once reproved him or tried to force him to learn, being resigned, without bitterness, to her own fate; she had shrugged her shoulders, knowing

already that her son would someday perform some sort of manual labour, as she herself did and as his father had done, and, since she herself could neither read nor write, she judged it quite natural that he would not be able to learn these difficult and abstruse matters. . . . And therefore he did not mind being alone, nor did he suffer when he was cold-shouldered by those of his own age who had middle-class tendencies or aspirations.

Every day Palle went to Ponte a Mensola and stopped in front of the garage, for the mechanic had promised to give him a job as soon as he judged it possible; he stood there and looked the man in the eyes from under the peak of his cap, without saying anything—just as a dog crouches down and gazes at its master to assure him of its affection and devotion—in order to remind him of his promise and make certain that he had not forgotten it; awaiting some sign in order, like the dog, to leap into activity, a sign telling him: “Come on, take your coat off and start doing something.” He would follow him in his work, justifying his presence by means of a bright smile, which he made use of as a kind of safe-conduct.

He was fascinated by machines, by all machines, from the finest motorcar to the most decrepit bicycle; he would wander round and round them, stoop down to examine them, stand in front of them, hands in pockets, ecstatically, for hours—as though he longed to pluck some secret from them, to gain their confidence, their love. Occasionally the mechanic would give him some heavy job to do, such as moving things or carrying them to his house or holding something up while he was working on it, and would reward him with a few pennies or with a word confirming his promise.

To go and choose, for his friend, this luckless hobbledehoy, this ugly, awkward creature, dressed like nothing on earth—this was something that the Materassis could not swallow. And to think that, without going very far away, there were, amongst their own tenants, two youths of his own age who were the sons of a municipal customs employee, and another the son of a mas-

ter mason, all of them studying seriously and destined to become well established and comfortably situated in life, rising, to their advantage, above the present status of their families; and all the notice Remo had taken of them was to punch their heads unsparingly. Furthermore, in a very modest hired house on the way to Il Salviatino, there lived a Venetian count who had been for many years established in the neighbourhood of Florence and who, if he might be said to have reached the lowest point financially, had still remained at the very highest point in native dignity and courtesy. The Materassis knew him well; the Count called them "Signorine," and not, like vulgar people, "Teresa and Carolina" or "the Materassis," but "the Misses Materassi." And when he spoke to them he would say: "At your service," "I am obliged to you," "My humble respects," etc. In view of his privileged position Remo might have made friends with the Count's sons, who were also much about his own age. But—even better—the Count also had a daughter, twelve years old and extremely pretty, and possibly . . . possibly, someday, in order to derive some small advantage from that impecunious countship of his, he might perhaps find a use for certain solid things which were at their disposal, such as the houses and the farm, and the bank notes which they were all the time sending to be placed on deposit in the savings bank: why should they not share things in common with the Count, and become themselves semi-countesses? At this point Carolina was constrained to add: "And what a trousseau *that* bride would have to have!" And Teresa, rising to her feet, raised her hand and, as if she wished to utter a threat against the whole universe rather than a mere statement, concluded with a hard expression: "Not even the Queen . . ."

And then to go and take up with that ignorant lout, who had a mother with whom you couldn't carry on a proper conversation, who greeted you with a grunt rather than with words! A very different thing from "My compliments" and "My humble respects"! A scarecrow who was always alone because nobody wanted to be with him. When they asked him the reason, Remo

replied with conviction: "He's a good chap, I like Palle"; and to him he said: "Come along, Palle, come on, let's go." Palle would follow him without answering, and Remo, after uttering his name, did not even look, knowing that he had his unreserved support. He would not have thought of starting any undertaking without him, whatever it might be. And it was a rare thing for him to explain his plans to him, for discussion was not necessary to either of them, action was all that mattered—unless indeed an idea was blurted out aloud when they were together; but in general few words passed between them, only those indispensable for their youthful exploits; and sometimes a new idea would be born and understood and accepted in a flash on both sides.

It can be imagined how close the natural affinities must have been which brought them and kept them together, and that the constant association of these two kindred spirits gradually tightened the bonds and cemented their union. Without anticipating too much in my story, I will merely say that we are still some distance from that.

Such was Palle, who became the inseparable companion and friend of Remo—Palle of whom, eight years ago, all we knew was a mysterious dark mark round one of Remo's eyes. And it was in order to get at Remo, to achieve contact with him, to poke their noses as far as possible into his life, with the perseverance characteristic of places where very little happens, that everybody was always shouting: "Palle! Palle!"

Teresa and Carolina wait and see, Giselda sings, and Niobe goes grape harvesting

MANY were the phases through which the two aunts had passed, during those eight years, in relation to their nephew. At first they believed that the youth's only path to fortune would be by way of serious, regular, prolonged study, to which he would surrender himself with inflexible determination, making full and happy use of the means at the disposal of his adoptive family. These two good sisters, who had been occupied with work to the exclusion of all else, might now be said, for the first time, to be devoting a moment to making out their own accounts instead of those of their clients, to looking round and seeing with astonishment that their resources were of such magnitude as to make many things possible. Not, of course, for them to live, themselves, in a more humane manner, working at a less feverish pace, allowing themselves a few hours of rest and quiet, or a walk, an amusement, a distraction—not that, but to make this boy who had fallen from heaven in their midst into an important and respected citizen. This, besides being their most cherished aspiration and a source of secret pleasure hitherto unknown to them, would excite, and deserve, the applause of all. To these earthly joys would be added other, heavenly ones, the blessings which their virtuous, unhappy sister would shower down from above, like rose petals,

upon their heads. And, since it was not difficult to see, even from the beginning, the delight that the boy took in mechanical matters, and his frankness in admitting it, they decided with one accord to make an engineer of him, a mechanical engineer; a builder of machines, of ships, perhaps—though their notion of the sea was highly fantastic and primitive; a man who would someday be at the head of a factory, a dockyard, who would have thousands of workmen under him, who would invent some new machine or at least bring existing ones to perfection, who would be a millionaire and would probably become a deputy, a senator, a minister. These seamstresses, these small landowners of the Florentine plain, dreamed of an ascent to incalculable heights: their nephew, like a lighthouse, would rise upon that spot to illuminate the world.

Teresa was the chief architect of these dreams, while Carolina embellished them with detail, adorning them with embroidered decoration as she did the necks of the chemises and the bands of the drawers that her sister handed to her, ready cut out; and every now and then she was conscious of a fit of shuddering, of a dizziness that sent a thrill of excitement through her. They never raised their heads from their work, they never relaxed their efforts except to enjoy, for one moment, the panorama of these dawning aspirations.

But Remo, alas, loved the kind of mechanics that he practised with Palle in a room behind the house, which they had extracted, with considerable difficulty, from the farmer and had transformed into a garage, a factory, a dockyard; it could be closed by means of a roller-blind, and in it could be admired the most diverse collection of tools and appliances, kept carefully and jealously in order, even to a small outboard engine for a boat, upon which they had been working for some time with mysterious perseverance. Who had given the two of them this mechanical knowledge, rudimentary as it was? No one. It was through their own burning passion that science was revealed to them, day by day: it was in the air, and they breathed it in.

When their hope that Remo would become an engineer, an inventor, a constructor of machines, had—not without causing them much distress—evaporated, they came down to more accessible heights, with the idea of sending him to an industrial school, whence he would emerge as a first-class organizer, a man of humbler scientific attainment but of far greater practical knowledge; a man who would also reach the top of his profession, but by short cuts, escaping the burden of the prolonged and serious studies for which he did not appear inclined—for after all, in a time like the present, practical knowledge is the most important element in any kind of success. Teresa assured her sister that great men never went in for regular studies and that the universities produced mediocre types, or men who succeed by sheer hard work without being clever; and that in Italy, as in America, men who could scarcely sign their own names had risen to unheard-of heights. Carolina thought the same, saying that Remo had the eye of a practical man—and in this she was perhaps not far wrong—of a practical man and a man of action, not of a brainless hard worker; a man who can create a world out of nothing, with no assistance but his own will and his own genius. This thought made her shudder and turn dizzy, even more than usual.

But little by little the great arterial road of industry narrowed down, became a lane, a blind alley, a cul-de-sac at the end of which they all found themselves, nephew and aunts as well, having come to a dead stop. It became, therefore, essential for them to escape, and transfer their ambitions to some more reasonable field.

Remo would one day be the owner of the farm, and of the houses which yielded a good income, and also of a certain sum of money by means of which he would be able to enlarge his property: for they knew that it would be easy to acquire more land in the neighbourhood, since, now that they were known to be wealthy, offers had already been made to them; they could have bought another farm, and later, two, but had avoided doing

this because they were unable to occupy themselves with looking after land and, above all, because they had not the slightest interest in it. Now they were sorry for it, seeing the young man as a future farmer, like his great-grandfather, the simple peasant; but this they did not even whisper, though others trumpeted it abroad—that he, out of nothing, had succeeded in making a small fortune, and that, out of that, it should be easy to make a big one. Remo should be an independent farmer, not subordinate to anyone, with modern appliances such as were not yet known in those regions. When they talked to their wealthy clients they would ask them, with great deference and false timidity, who was the gentleman to whom they were engaged, who the fortunate man could be whom they themselves were slaving, in every possible way, to fascinate—or to keep the fascination going: he must certainly be a nobleman? And often the answer would be that he was a landowner and had an estate in this or that province, that he himself managed the estate, and that he had agricultural appliances and reared livestock. To start a new type of farming at Santa Maria, to set up big cow sheds with a butter and cheese factory, to grow early fruits and vegetables in greenhouses . . . here was a new dream in which imagination overflowed until they saw their nephew as the owner of the whole fertile plain. But the dream stopped at the point where the roads began to go uphill, for they cherished an inextinguishable hatred and racial bitterness for the hill country—"nothing but a heap of stones, as poor Grandfather used to say; and he knew all there was to know about land."

With heads bent over their embroidery frames they built up their dreams together, and their thoughts and their flights of fancy were a poem. They regretted that they had loved the land so little, that they had always kept the excellent Fellino, with his bad smells and his no less smelly animals, at a respectful distance; and for a moment they forgot the complete lack of consideration in which they held a cow and her calf, the disgrace they attached to a poor donkey, and their dislike even for seeing

hens in front of their door—a matter about which they had given strict orders. Now, if a hen had by some misfortune ventured there, they would not have chased it away but would have given it a few crumbs.

So Remo was sent to the agricultural school, and this time with the accompaniment of authoritative recommendations and the interest of persons in official positions.

Every autumn there was a new project, a new plan, minutely worked out and starting off with splendid prospects, but which always fizzled out with the approach of summer. And each time the fault of this failure was attributed in the first place to their nephew, who had no wish to study, then to his teachers, who did not know how to teach, and then to the bad organization of the schools.

How was it possible that this boy should not make progress, he who, with only three months of preparation, had succeeded in getting his elementary certificate with full marks and all possible honours, both from his teachers and from the Headmistress herself—including a luncheon which had become almost historical, attended not only by the Headmistress and Calliope Bonciani, but by the latter's mother, the Signora Cherubina, ninety-two years old, who in her younger days had been a modiste and who came to Santa Maria in a puce-coloured dress, with a cape of lace and jet fastened at the throat with a fine coral cameo set in gold, a wedding present, upon which was carved a picture of the Flood? And upon her white head, in addition to three coils of black hair stuck on in the form of a bun at the back and looking as though they had forgotten to grow white, a black headdress like a penwiper. She might, in fact, have been said to be wearing two penwipers that day at Santa Maria, one on the top of her head and one at the back. That was what she looked like, this queer little figure Signora Cherubina, who, on that idyllic and memorable day, had eaten enough for three people, with her nose and her sharp chin sometimes seeming to peck at each other and sometimes to be kissing, doing honour to the lunch prepared by

Niobe with masterly art and served by Tonina, who, what with the turmoil in the dining room and the heat in the kitchen, had turned from an apple into a cherry and looked as if the blood would come spouting from her cheeks at any moment. Signora Cherubina had told stories and cracked jokes during the entire meal, to such effect that she even held her own against the Head-mistress, whose eloquence was somewhat dimmed that day, reduced in intensity, covered, as it were, with a rosy veil; she looked as if she were allowing herself one sweet, benign hour of respite, her face lit up by an inextinguishable smile, like a giant who, having overcome a man, a lion, or a bull, lies down on the grass and plays like a child with insects and butterflies. At that splendid moment Niobe's only observation, as she respectfully congratulated Signora Cherubina, was that the Lord must have given her a strong digestion; to which the sprightly old lady had replied that during the whole of her youth she had suffered from stomach trouble, and that the doctors did not know how she would manage to survive. "My goodness! If the Lord hadn't sent you that stomach trouble you might have been dead by now!" Niobe did not say this aloud, but she thought it in her usual picturesque way, and we can say it for her without fear of being misunderstood.

And then the new dream cast a new and brilliant light over everything, and everything smiled again until the next catastrophe.

Amongst all these flights of fancy the most interesting phenomenon was that Remo maintained always an irreproachable demeanor. Not merely did he never rebel against changes of course, but he welcomed each new project, not with enthusiasm, which was not part of his character, but with exemplary readiness—a cool readiness which his aunts took for genuine good will, deep-seated, manly, requiring no exclamations or blandishments; so that each time they were certain, to their great relief, that they had found the right solution, the best course; whereas his behaviour makes it clear to us that he was prepared for an indefinite

repetition of the same game. And when the new plan, in its turn, came to grief, he would become evasive, mysterious, impenetrable; there would be a far-off look in his eyes, as though he were gazing into the future with great discernment in order to reach some decisive result. The minds of the two women were, by this, held in suspense, reading in his eyes, as they did, so much will power, so much penetration, and a confidence that could not lie; and also, at the same time, the tranquillity, the assurance of one who has in himself, and has always had, the quality that others are so anxious to find in him. They felt all adrift in their aspirations and researches.

The schools—agricultural, industrial, and scientific—had resolved themselves into magnificent excursions with Palle through the streets of Florence and the country lanes, to the villages round about, on the Arno or to the Cascine gardens, to recreation grounds and places where machines could be studied, and to other places where the beneficial effects of trees, their restful shade and their tasty fruit, could be enjoyed, without any need to go to school; above all, in fact, they were learning to live. And, though the thought of school was kept in the most remote corner of his mind, the moment he was asked he would assume a highly edifying youthful dignity and say earnestly: “I’m going to be an engineer, I’m a student of engineering; I’m at the industrial school; I’m at the agricultural school, I’m going to be a farmer”—just as though he were on the way to becoming the chief of all engineers, all industrialists, all farmers.

One after the other, like figures in a shooting gallery knocked down by well-directed shots, and with the same naturalness and the same cheerfulness, all the dreams, all the plans and projects had gone tumbling down, head over heels, amidst the laughter of the spectators.

Lost, bewildered, incapable of organizing any new plan, the aunts suffered from acute nervous attacks. They lost their tempers, they shrieked, they wept, they made scenes with their nephew, abusing and upbraiding him, threatening to cast him off,

to send him into a factory or to some humble, poor man's job, to be a porter like his father, or a carter like the father of his worthy friend Palle. They were under no obligation to him, they said; all they did was out of pure kindness, not from duty.

At these outbursts Remo would give a faint smile; but it was such a quiet, and above all such a beautiful, smile that they interpreted it as meaning that their threatened abandonment and rejection of him did not frighten him in the least, and that, without a word of reproof or entreaty, he might just go off on his own: they would simply see him disappear. And as far as that they could not go.

To very few men is it given to smile so beautifully. A beautiful smile can conceal or reveal so many things, even if it is only charm and illusion that come from a mouth perfectly modelled and coloured. . . . Above all, they had no intention of being burdened with that wretched Palle.

The moment the idea of losing their nephew occurred to them they were, in effect, throwing Palle overboard: he, at any rate, would pay for it, for he would have to go. He could be left to his own devices, for they were not prepared to keep two idlers on their hands. . . . An ignoramus who, if somebody didn't tell him, would sit down at the table with his cap on. It must be confessed that, little by little, through the invincible artfulness of Remo, Palle had established himself there for meals, especially at midday when his mother was not at home, and also, if required, for sleeping; and his mother, at home, far from being grieved or troubled at not having him with her, was happy to know that her son had found some good, kind people who loved him, knowing also how well he deserved such affection. At lunch time, after these scenes, as Palle stood hesitating at the gate, disposed to run home and find a piece of bread, Remo would say with a laugh: "Come on, Palle, come inside, Palle, we're going to have lunch." And this time it was the aunts, with their long-pondered plans, who were the comic figures knocked head over heels by a well-directed shot.

First their imagination, and now their anger, was exhausted, and the two sisters, worn out, defeated, were left in a state of suspense, looking at each other in bewilderment, as much as to say: "We must wait and see." When they became, to a certain extent, calm again, they adopted towards their nephew a similar attitude of mind, devoid both of their former ambitions and of their subsequent bitterness. "Wait and see," said the expression on their faces as they looked at him, as also when they looked at each other without saying anything: "Wait and see." And Remo, who had never withdrawn himself from former experiments by accepting a new attitude as a new decision, showed himself convinced, satisfied, sure of himself; and this time again, playing his part in the game as though the latest thing were always the best—and with all the ease of his usual impassiveness—he offered the pleasantest possible spectacle to his aunts and seemed to be answering them: "Wait and see."

Their resolve to wait and see, which seems, at first sight, so easy a thing, was not, in fact, so easy as it might be imagined or believed to be, and was indeed only made in succession to a great many other resolves, at a moment when their minds, weary of seeking, felt drained and empty; it hardly, in fact, amounted to a resolve at all, but arose from their inability to build any more castles in the air on the young man's account, or to challenge the future with any more of those countless amazing projects and fancies, which served only to disturb their night's rest and the quiet they needed during the day to enable them to work.

The shouting and the struggle over, without any practical result from the attempt to control events, events began, with the greatest possible coolness, to go forward all by themselves. It is a thing that often happens. In our daily life we are often victims of certain misconceptions, both as actors and as spectators—illusions of the senses, chiefly of the sight—and just when we are most sure that it is we who are steering the boat, we notice (it is a terrible moment) that the boat is carrying us along with it, just

where it wills; and it is then that we make every possible effort to cling to our first illusion and to prove to the spectator that we are doing so. You will certainly think this a very queer state of affairs, because, even if we can cling to our illusion, this does not affect those who stand and watch us from the bank, who can always see better than we can that the boat is taking its own course, and who burst into fits of laughter at all our cries and gestures. Well, well! If they paid attention to nothing but our clamour, which is intended merely to conceal the real movement of the boat, they would exist in the complete assurance that it is we who are doing the steering, and with perfect success. And if to our magnificent clamour they add their own, which is a hundred times greater, I defy anybody to make out how things are going. It is only when the boat comes to a stop, and the person in it, owing to his unreasoning gesticulations, fails to notice it and continues, unafraid, to behave in the same way, that then, at last, everybody sees that the boat was going its own way, and: "Ah! Oh! Eh!" they cry.

Owing to this extremely odd phenomenon, as long as the two women were given over to their countless dreams and plans and fancies, their eyes, blinded by impatience and clouded by astonishment, were incapable of seeing anything except the collapse of those same dreams and fancies; their efforts continued to be fruitless, they were astonished at meeting with no response, and it was only when they gave up trying to do anything that they began to see many things.

Many, indeed, are the things that a young man like this can reveal to women of this kind.

Of Palle, all we knew at one time was a mysterious dark mark round one of Remo's eyes; but the latter we have seen well on the way to becoming a handsome young man, strong and athletic, and not to be easily discomfited. No one, however, could have guessed how far the extraordinary beauty and the instinctive elegance of this young man would go. Those features that we already know had, as they matured, produced a harmony of

colour and proportion rarely to be met with in a living being.

Tall without giving any impression of lankiness, he moved his limbs with a manly grace that gave no suggestion either of over-refinement or of coarseness; all the muscles in his body were well developed, but without over-emphasis.

But the most perplexing thing of all to an observer was the classical beauty of the face beneath the dark, wavy, glossy hair—a face of a pronounced aristocratic oval, a spiritual face, upon which the impress of adolescence seemed to linger indefinitely, and upon whose skin lay the exuberant freshness of youth without betraying the energy of the blood; for the only red in the face was in the mouth, which was scarlet, with lips so perfectly modelled—the upper lip, as it curled, projected perceptibly over the lower—that though both fleshy and fleshly they did not appear to be made of flesh.

Only in Greek or Renaissance sculpture are we permitted to encounter samples of this species: Leonardo, Michelangelo, Donatello, Verrocchio would have been struck by his appearance. Small wonder, therefore, that two poor humble women should gaze so lingeringly upon him.

Remo's eyes, beneath well-marked, glossy eyebrows, were large and bright, with clear whites; and it was only their beauty that made them look gentle, since, thanks to it, they were unable to assume an expression of indifference; you felt, when you looked at them, that they did not respond warmly to your look but accepted the warmth of other people's sympathy without returning it, without, in fact, asking any questions. You might even have thought that it was in order not to disturb the harmony of his general appearance that he never displayed any excess of visible vitality; his eyes never looked eager even when he gazed at you, but the more eager they managed to look, the more they retained their brightness.

Although these things had come to flowering maturity under their eyes, the aunts seemed to be seeing them for the first time, and with a very obvious satisfaction, now that they had aban-

doned their former fantasies on the subject of agriculture, engineering, and industry, fantasies which had now been relegated, like old shavings, to the rubbish bin of memories.

Sometimes, as they bent over their work, the same idea came to both of them, and, raising their heads for an instant, each understood the other's thought, which had turned to the extraordinary, dream-like occurrence of the boy who had arrived in their house, as it were from nowhere, and who had turned with such bewildering rapidity into an extremely handsome young man, strong, elegant, attracting the interest of all. They were too modest to express this thought, and in the end one of them would say: "What time is Remo coming home?" "At one," her sister would answer. It was a pointless question, but they could not open their mouths without speaking of him, and the practical reason for the remark made a little innocent excuse: they knew perfectly well what time he would be coming home.

He spoke little, chopping up his words or slurring over them, talking in fits and starts, in monosyllables; he never raised his voice and generally preferred some elegant abbreviation: for instance, instead of calling his aunts by their full names—"Zia Teresa," "Zia Carolina"—he would address them, in a charming falsetto voice, as "Zi' Tè," "Zi' Cà," with other tasteful variations and intonations. Niobe he called "Nini" or "Bebè," or just "Ni." She was like a dog; one could not say how much she would understand of certain oddities, but one could always be sure of seeing her respond.

If her two mistresses were in the seventh heaven of delight at hearing themselves addressed, in that voice, as "Zi' Tè" and "Zi' Cà," the servant felt herself melting away altogether at being called "Nini" or "Bebè," or just "Ni." Their usual names, which they were accustomed to hearing pronounced always in the same way and by everybody, were transformed, when uttered by him in this way, into a new and unfamiliar joy, powerful enough to change them and make them feel three different women.

He never abandoned himself to a burst of laughter, never went

beyond a smile—never really even reached it, in fact, since all that was required was the slightest possible movement of his lips to flash forth the wonder of his perfect teeth. And his whole face would be lit up, as though smiling were his sole concern.

Nor was it possible, by looking at him, to detect, in the slightest degree, what he was thinking about (his aunts had plenty of opportunity for observing this). It was not that there was any trace of sullenness or gloom in him, but rather a sort of elementary purity and, even more, a secret satisfaction, coupled with reserve and composure, and the very slightly teasing tone of one who, knowing others, knows also, with marvellous exactness, the value of his own resources. For of course to be slightly teased—and sometimes a little more than slightly—is a thing that has great attraction, both for men and for women, far more than to be treated with gravity and respect.

Beneath that symmetrically spacious brow, was there an entire absence of thought, or was it concealed, to avoid disturbing the harmony and freshness of the face? His external warmth and interior coldness showed themselves in every act, as though his spirit lived in isolation; nor did he do anything to bring it forth from its isolation, and there, in fact, it remained securely established. It was a coldness that, at first attractive, left behind a feeling of suspense that first kindled and then froze.

I must add that Remo combined, with his physical beauty and elegance, a lordly elegance in dress, so that his aunts, ever since the time of his arrival, had taken a great pleasure in dressing him well—without indeed paying too much attention to the matter, but regarding it as the natural thing to do; and also in settling the tailor's and shirtmaker's bills without too much discussion. But, from the moment when they had made up their minds to "wait and see," the matter had assumed wider proportions, as can easily be understood, and the bills, too, had become larger in consequence—so much so that sometimes they would have preferred *not* to see; but it had now become impossible for them to close their eyes. He knew how to wear his clothes and his hats

with superb dash, and how to tie his tie. He knew how to choose materials so as to harmonize their colours: and there was always a harmony in his own clothes, the result not so much of study as of instinct, of a natural and slightly careless grace. He was, in fact, extremely quick at choosing, without any feminine dawdling or changes of mind, and yet he could have lingered endlessly over it if he had had nothing else to do. With the tailor, too, he was quick when trying on a suit: once he had it on, he carried out certain movements of his own to make sure that it fitted him comfortably in its various parts; then he would draw himself up stiffly, stretching his feet outwards with his legs half open, plunging his hands into the pockets of jacket and trousers; then he would cast an eye all over it and suggest an alteration. He would throw it off as though he had pressing business awaiting him: the suit was progressing satisfactorily.

He was quick in all his actions, but there was one above all in which his rapidity became incredible: undressing. It was impossible to follow the sequence of his movements: you saw him dressed, and then you saw him naked in front of you. He made use of this extraordinary gift, flaunting it with unconscious naturalness amongst the other young men at sports clubs or physical-training schools; but at home there was only one person who might have chanced upon it and wondered at it—Niobe.

Whether he came home at two o'clock, which was his usual hour, or at three, or four, or even five, which sometimes happened, Remo got up at nine—never later. He had no need of prolonged rest to restore his energy, nor did he ever rest during the day. Niobe would bring him two buckets of cold water to his room, and, shortly afterwards, his breakfast, which he consumed in his pyjamas or, sometimes, urged by the sharp sting of appetite, still wrapped in the bath towel with which he was drying himself, removing the cigarette from his lips. With the coffee and milk and buttered rolls there was always some choice fruit, at which he showed his pleasure with childish glee.

He was accustomed to sleeping with the window wide open at

all seasons; Niobe, when she came in in the morning, had found the room flooded by a thunderstorm, the water frozen in the jug, or snow on the floor. And always naked under the blankets. As soon as Niobe had put down the buckets and gone away, the young man would jump out of bed, step into the big zinc saucer that hung against the wall during the day, and so take his bath, using a large sponge to deluge himself over and over again with cold water and passing a small piece of soap quickly all over his body. As he dried himself he ran about and slapped himself all over, and performed exercises and evolutions: and both the bath and the exercises would probably be repeated an hour later at the rowing or swimming club, or some other, similar resort that he frequented. He then put on a pair of straw slippers and, lighting a cigarette, went on slapping and rubbing himself, circling about the room as he leapt in the air and performed exercises and acrobatic feats.

At this point Niobe would appear for the second time, with the coffee and fruit; and shortly afterwards a third time, bringing a small jug of hot water for shaving.

It had come about that, in the course of these three visits, and without Remo giving any sign that he noticed it, she had witnessed, a little at a time and by pure chance, the various phases of these morning activities, which were completed in less than an hour; so that she was able to reconstruct the whole course of events without any effort of memory. She had seen everything as she came or went, by arriving too early or leaving too late, and sometimes through a crack in the door, which she could not close properly because her hands were full—and which Remo, taken up with his own doings, had been far too busy to notice. And yet, could he have failed to notice a preliminary creaking, an ill-concealed movement on the part of this stout woman, a belated closing of the door?

All these things the mistresses of the house were prevented, by their superior rank, from seeing, whereas the servant, because of her humble position, saw everything perfectly.

But sometimes Niobe, unable to contain the joy that these tasks gave her, had let fall, to her mistresses, some exclamation on the subject, some image, comparison or interjection, some chance word that came from her very soul, some wholehearted expression of praise for the young man's physical strength and beauty, at which they had smiled knowingly, thinking that it must be, to a great extent, a product of her imagination rather than of her actual inquisitiveness—the imagination of a woman with a highly questionable past—since their nephew had always maintained, in their presence, a demeanour of quite exceptional correctness and reserve; and if, sometimes, for some unavoidable reason, he had come down and hung about in their room in his pyjamas, he had comported himself, in that costume, with as much natural restraint as if he had been dressed to go out. So that, however much they looked, the poor dears still had a lot to see.

The oddest thing was that, the sisters having charged Giselda with the job of looking after his clothes—precious objects that required intelligent care—that wretched woman had several times been attacked by a raging desire to tear them in pieces with her own hands, especially the trousers. Since she had taken to hating the entire male sex she could not bear the sight of a pair of trousers; their contact made her wild; and the first time she had been forced to handle them, she had crumpled them and pulled them about and wrenched them out of shape till she had nearly destroyed them and had had to iron them carefully all over again, thus earning, by her zeal, the unstinted praise of her sisters. And when, in order to carry out these little tasks, she had happened to go past his door, or had had to go into the room where Remo, in the evening, was changing his clothes to go to Florence or after coming back, he had stood there in front of her as naked as the Lord made him, imperturbable, without a hint of respect or modesty, maintaining the same indifference that he would have shown on finding himself, in that state, in the presence of another man; or—even worse—displaying his nudity in a provoking, offensive, coarse manner. Giselda, angrily turning her back at this

sight that she could not avoid, would go off spitting gall and bitterness: "Indecent! Dirty blackguard!" And the oddest part of the whole affair was that she could not complain to anyone, even by proclaiming the truth, the just offence against her, since Niobe, knowing herself to be in fault over the crack in the door, which we have already seen, and not knowing to what extent Remo might have noticed it, was herself entirely in the wrong. The matter would have become a point of accusation against her, and a just one too, after which all that she would have been allowed to do would have been to go in and out of the room at exactly the right time, and to shut the door immediately; and if she did not do this, after an unpleasant scolding, he himself would have taken care to do it, without delay, making her go in and out at a given moment—an idea that did not at all please the old servant, who desired nothing more than to remain on the same basis as at present. Giselda's protests would have encountered hostility in this quarter: Niobe would have risen up in defence of the young man, proclaiming—and with justice—his innocence and his modesty. And her sisters, with whom, even in his pyjamas, he had retained a bearing that might have been taken as an example for girls at a convent school, a bearing that would have been suitable in a virgin—her sisters would have hurled themselves upon her like two wild beasts. Poor Giselda, there was only one course for her—to keep silent, perpetually silent. And one even more comic aspect of the matter must be mentioned: how was it that the austere, virginal bearing of their nephew, fit to be taken as an example for a girls' school, how was it that it served as an example the other way round for his virgin aunts, causing them to lose something of the austerity and reserve which had always formed the granite foundation of their existence? It had sometimes happened that Niobe or Giselda had, for some reason, knocked at the door of their room while they were shut in there, and had been answered with piercing screams: "No, no, you can't! You can't come in! Don't come in! I've got nothing on! I'm in my chemise! I'm in my drawers!" Just as though somebody

wanted to come in and make a violent physical assault upon them, or thrust daggers into them. And they were not really undressed at all, or only partly so, so that anybody might have been allowed to come in; or again, quite possibly they were very much dressed up and engaged in tidying the things in the chest of drawers; and anyhow, the person who wanted to come in was only Giselda or Niobe. And even if they were really undressed, and really had a horror of being seen, once they were inside their room they still felt the necessity of announcing it at the top of their voices: "We've got nothing on! We're in our chemises! We're in our drawers!" . . . Why?

Long past were the days when the two sisters, as they worked together, dreamed over the future of their nephew: he had become a present, urgent reality; and even though he possessed, to an extraordinary degree, the art of not making his weight felt, yet felt it was. But his presence and his general look of serenity solved with extreme simplicity problems that might have been thought insoluble. He accomplished this also by making use of his personality in a negative way, for he knew just the right moment to disappear or to reappear again. In this he resembled the great Napoleon, who, if victorious, used to keep everybody waiting at the moment when they could hardly bear it and were stamping their feet with impatience to see him, thus giving them time to build new and bigger triumphal arches and allowing their longing for him to grow into a positive agony. But when he lost a battle he would descend like a thunderbolt upon Paris, where nobody felt any desire to see him, arriving hidden in a dark, dilapidated carriage; he would have come on a donkey, or riding on a broomstick, as long as he got there. Remo had no need to speak, either in self-recommendation or self-defense; his habit was to speak very little with women, keeping them in a state of excitement and suspense which he countered with his own heavenly serenity; and always making clear, to those who toiled and slaved for their existence from morning till night, his

own conviction that life was easy; smiling at the futility of their efforts.

This boy, born at Ancona of the most luckless working-class people, the father a Roman, the mother a Florentine, left as a child at the mercy of the winds, unwilling ever to study, as though he felt, for himself, the vanity of such efforts, was the possessor not merely of quick physical perceptions but of an exceptionally acute feeling for life, and, knowing by instinct that life is hard and difficult, set out deliberately to assert the contrary, basing his own life on this new infallible principle, and gradually convincing himself, as he convinced others, of the truth of his assertion. So that it had been easy for him to obtain many things simply by demolishing, with shrewd blows, all the difficulties that stood between himself and them, and, even more, by demonstrating his principle openly. When at the age of eighteen he had asked his aunts—but without being at all insistent—for an expensive motor bicycle and they had at first refused and then postponed the buying of it, they heard, next day, at their gate, the horn of the new machine and the clatter of its powerful pistons; and in spite of all their investigations they never succeeded in finding out where the money had come from. And so their first agonized waitings for Remo when he did not come home at night were succeeded by others, even more agonizing, for what he might bring back with him when he did come.

The mystery that hovered round that figure of serene beauty was highly disconcerting to the two women.

They had been long and painful, those first times of waiting, when the youth had started, little by little, to absent himself from the nest during the hours of night. At first there had been clandestine escapes, and, on their part, anxiety for fear some ill might befall him.

They had remained until the first light of dawn at that window from which, now for a long time, they no longer looked, on Sunday afternoons, to be admired and themselves to admire the procession of lovers going towards the hills; and every now and

then Niobe had put her head in at the door to ask: "Any sign of him?" and to reassure them on the subject of the young man's good sense and of his courage. No ill could have befallen him, she said: he knew how to look after himself and was capable of extricating himself from any trouble; his lateness was due simply to his having lingered indefinitely with his friends, talking about motorcars and races and competitions and matches—subjects for which young men turn day into night and night into day again without noticing it, without any desire for sleep or even for food. She concluded by suggesting that they should go to bed and try to sleep, that they needed rest, otherwise they would end up by falling ill. They did not even answer; they were determined to endure their torment to the very end. Their minds were full of tragedies, of terribly complicated adventures with a background, always, of love and death. Where had he gone and with whom? Who had seen him? With Palle, always with Palle, he had gone out with Palle—"with that hateful Palle, with that ugly brute Palle." Palle was the cause of everything, it was he who was responsible—"blast Palle!" Niobe went off to see Palle's mother, to wake her up and find out if he was sleeping there—a useless journey. When Remo was out, it was pointless to look for Palle; there could be no mistake about that. And Palle's mother did not show herself the slightest bit worried about the matter—in fact, her heart was filled with confidence and tranquillity, wherever he was: an unshakeable faith with regard to her son and his fate could admit neither blame nor error, nor generate doubt: if he was out, it must be so, it was right that it should be so, whatever hour it was; the hour, for her, had not the slightest importance, nor did she think that the Lord would wish to smite him by sending misfortune upon him—impossible. Her faith in God and in her son was one and the same. She considered all this worrying and restlessness and the affectation of sending the servant backwards and forwards to confabulate with her to be futilities of the rich, luxuries that she herself could not afford. And when she answered about her son, she felt that he was protected by some

supernatural immunity. He was all right where he was, wherever he was; he must be all right, and he could come to no harm. If, someday, through some fatal misadventure, they were to bring him back lifeless, she would take him in her arms like Mary, the mother of Christ, without a tear, without a cry of revolt, turned to stone by her sorrow, and would murmur towards heaven: "Lord, Thy will be done, as in heaven, so on earth."

Niobe came away shaking her head, even though, for different reasons, she was of the same opinion. The Materassis, on the other hand, when they heard her story, were driven into a frenzy by this blind faith: they said that the woman was crazy, idiotic, feeble-minded, demented, that she was nothing but a clod of earth, incapable of feeling anything for anybody; that by dint of washing rags for half-wits she had become more half-witted than they. "How can anyone have a moment's peace when those good-for-nothing boys are roaming loose over the countryside at night? A happy sort of person she must be! That's the kind of character to have!" What notion they had of the world outside and of the night is, however, a question that would take too long to discuss here.

When he came back, Remo had to pass right in front of them as they sat, hard-faced, still bending over their work although it was almost morning, making a exhibition of their distress by an icy silence, and pretending not to notice him, or his presence there, of which they were conscious to the last drop of their blood. Or they would raise their heads with a severe expression, turning towards him so as to show that their eyes were red with working all night and with weeping, without opening their mouths. They would be sitting with the shutters closed but with the lower part raised to admit a little light—sole evidence of their presence and of their situation. Or again, according to circumstances, they would rush downstairs together, all in disorder, half dressed, with hair flying, and make a terrible scene, hurling themselves upon him with shrieks and tears, showering bitter reproaches, insults, and threats upon him to make him suffer a little of what they

themselves had had to suffer. They had tried the whole gamut of notes and chords, had attempted every possible method, in order to reach his heart.

The young man, apparently, had not the slightest belief in this suffering, but accepted the scene, in whatever way it developed, as a natural and inevitable fact, a performance to which he must resign himself. He would light a cigarette and smoke it as though he wished it to be understood that his every faculty, his every thought, was concentrated upon it, and upon the translucent spirals that ascended so gracefully towards the ceiling. He would look round patiently, with complete naturalness and with the tactful look of one who is waiting for someone else to fulfil a bodily function that cannot be put off. He allowed them to give vent to their anger without himself taking any interest in it or seeking, by as much as one syllable, to diminish its violence, and without making any pretence of not seeing the light that came into the room through the shutters. And the more exhausting the scene proved, the more creditably he appeared to come out of it.

Once the frenzy was over, the questions began: had he had anything to eat? Yes. Remo had always had something to eat. This answer was obviously mortifying to the two women. They would have far preferred to see poor Niobe slaving away at that hour, pulling out the crockery and laying the table, lighting the fire to heat up some soup or cook some eggs. After the tragic scene, the bustle at that irregular hour, the inconvenience of getting him something to eat would have been agreeable. A supper which had begun with an *hors d'oeuvre* of tragedy would end with ill-concealed tenderness towards the fruit. They felt themselves thwarted by missing this second part; and that kept them in a state of excited curiosity: they would have liked to be further victimized. But what did he do, where did he go, where did he eat when he stayed out for so many hours?

The disorder in the minds of the two aunts was confronted by perfect order in that of their nephew.

He had had something to eat and now he wanted to go to bed

because it was time to sleep. He was not in the least drunk, because he never drank anything but water, except for one glass of wine at meals, and not always that: it was indeed a pleasure to see him gulping down a tumbler of water with all the freshness and cleanliness of the liquid he was swallowing. From the time when they had started to wait and see, the aunts had also been able to admire this healthy habit of his. He was completely self-possessed and retained all his lucidity of mind. He would start humming, would light a second cigarette, addressing his aunts in his customary falsetto voice: "Zi' Tè, Zi' Cà"—just as though it were midday instead of two or three in the morning.

Once they were back in their own room, the two women would go on whispering in hushed voices about what had happened. They admitted Niobe to the discussion, but were continually cutting her short and making her hold her tongue because she was talking too loud. She always did everything in her power to restore peace.

And when the early-morning hour of Remo's home-coming had become the normal thing and the aunts no longer waited for their nephew at the window or at their work, nor dared to make the slightest reproach at his behaviour, it often happened that, about two in the morning, they would be woken up with a jump by the noise of one or more motorcars stopping with a great clatter at their gate, from which would descend as many as eight or ten young men whom Remo would introduce into the holy place where the chemises and drawers lay; then he would wake Niobe, who, hooking on her skirt and smoothing back her hair, would arrive panting and assume the heroic attitude of one who comes to face a serious ordeal: it was a question of seating them all at the table and giving them something to eat. Reading in her face and in her troubled expression the best possible omen for the success of their enterprise, they began by embracing her, passing her from one to the other, seizing her round the neck, lifting her up in triumph. The poor dear wriggled about and cried out: "Leave me alone, let me go! Leave me alone if you want anything

to eat! You wretches, if you don't leave me you'll go hungry." This argument was so persuasive that they immediately left her alone, with frantic applause. Feverishly she spread the tablecloth and laid a plate and a knife and fork and glass for each of the crazy devils. One or two of the more affectionate ones gave proof of their kindness of heart by helping her to arrange these objects on the table, and she laughed when she felt herself becoming the centre of everyone's attention. The onslaught, the affection of these twenty-year-olds made her ready to burst with happiness, and she would have done anything for them; the uproar they made excited her, though at the same time it made her wriggle about and stop her ears.

No one asked himself whether it was permissible to make so much noise in that house at that time of night. No one suggested that they should be quieter, that they should not shout; it seemed to be understood that they should make as much din as possible. And if by any chance one of them, new to his surroundings, asked Remo whether they might not be making a nuisance of themselves by behaving like that, whether they might not be waking someone up or preventing people from sleeping, Remo would answer: "My God, no. Not at all. Carry on, make as much noise as you like. My aunts sleep sound, they wouldn't wake up even if a gun went off. You needn't worry, you can shout as loud as you like." Palle had run off to awaken the farmer and procure from him, in the name of the mistresses of the house, a couple of loaves of bread and some eggs, if there were not enough in the house; and when he came back with the loaves under his arm they carried him in triumph round the room and then deposited him in the middle of the table, improvising an ovation and speeches in his honour and inviting him to reply, and applauding as though he had already spoken. As soon as he saw his opportunity, he would jump down like a hare and run off into the kitchen to open the wine bottles; and when he reappeared with the flasks, one under each arm, and prepared to put them on the table, he was welcomed with a shout that might have been heard

in Florence. Remo was hunting about in the larder for some little thing that might do to whet their appetites in the meantime—some sausages or fried meat that had been left over. Then Niobe would arrive with an immense dish full of sliced ham and *salame*. This was the signal for the storm to burst. And while the party was attacking this gift from heaven, during the lull caused by their mouths being occupied a new noise broke in upon them from the kitchen—the sound of Niobe wielding the shovel; for she was lighting the fire and preparing to make an omelette with all the eggs she had been able to collect. And as soon as they had mopped up the ham and the *salame*, with extraordinary rapidity, and the noise was gradually increasing again as mouths became once more available, they started getting up from the table and running into the kitchen, where the omelette was already assuming a lovely golden-brown colour. The unfortunate cook was made to wriggle again before she could bring her job to a conclusion, exclaiming: "Bless the boys!"—and then they went back into the dining room to announce the new arrival. The wretches would have devoured even stones at that hour of the morning. They ate like wolves, and they were so impatient and so boisterous that it was not even possible to serve them in proper order. They stole food from each other's plates and in the struggles that ensued threw it on the floor, so that the dining room became like a pigsty. Nothing was left in the house—not an egg, not a crumb of bread, nor the smallest remnant of anything eatable.

Remo always said to his friends and to people who asked him where he lived: "I live at Santa Maria—come along and see. I keep parrots and I train monkeys. Come to Santa Maria and see my trained parrots, my tame monkeys." And little by little he had introduced his friends to his aunts; they all had cars or motor bicycles by means of which they were able to come and visit him. It is not easy to describe the pleasure these visits gave to the aunts: Remo's friends were all fine, lusty young men, bold and self-possessed, sporting, well dressed, well equipped for life; and yet it seemed as though he must have chosen them in order to

have an honourable triumph over them all, for none of them could compete with him; they all had something lacking, some shortcoming, some defect which placed them at a hopeless disadvantage to him, as the two sisters pointed out, making the most of it, in their discussions. In front of their friend's aunts, the young men behaved with great liveliness but equal good manners, and with a politeness that verged upon gallantry. Teresa's poor toil-worn face, earth-coloured, dusty-looking, was filled, when she spoke to them or listened to them, with a light which made her lip tremble slightly; and Carolina, unable to bear the rascals' eyes upon her for long at a time, would begin wriggling about on her chair in order to keep herself in countenance. These wrigglings of hers had nothing whatever in common with those of Niobe, who wriggled only when she felt herself seized and handled and pulled about by the young devils, who wrangled over her out of gaiety and affection. For Carolina, on the other hand, being more sensitive, all that was needed to make her wriggle was one glance from their eyes.

Palle acted as odd-job man and waiter. He went down to the cellar for another flask of wine, he trotted backwards and forwards between the kitchen and the dining room, between the dining room and the pantry; and every now and then he sat down and had something to eat with the guests, who made him the butt of a thousand jokes, all of them founded, in reality, on a feeling of friendship and equality for a young man both physically and socially inferior. He was perfectly capable of running out into the garden and picking, in the dark, fresh lettuces, moist with the dews of night, which the young men enjoyed as a supreme delicacy.

And what was happening on the upper floor of the house during these hours sacred to repose and silence?

As soon as they heard the noise of the motorcars, the two sisters would jump out of bed without lighting the lamp, and, cautiously opening the window, would start peeping out from behind the shutters; then, slipping on a petticoat and thrusting their bare

feet into slippers—and, if it was cold, wrapping themselves up in shawls—they would leave the room very quietly, still in the dark, one behind the other, hand in hand; holding their breath, making no sound, they would go along the passage to the head of the stairs and stand there with beating hearts—with hearts beating fast like the hearts of birds—as they leant over the banisters so as not to lose one instant of the scene which they reconstructed from the voices and noises below and from their own vivid imaginations.

“Listen—that’s Massimo!”
“That’s Vasco!”
“Sergio’s there too!”
“Franco!”
“Bruno!”
“Alfredo—he’s there as well!”
“Renzo!”
“Gastone!”
“Jim!”
One by one they recognized them all from their voices.
“But that one—who’s that?”
“Must be someone we don’t know.”
At Remo’s voice they were silent.
“They’ve gone into the kitchen.”
“They’re embracing Niobe!”
“Listen, listen!”
“They’ve got their arms round her neck!”
“Listen how she screams at them to let go!”
“She’s brought in the ham and sausage.”
“What a to-do!”
“Now they’re starting to eat.”
“Now she’s brought in the omelette.”
“Listen, it’s Palle; Palle’s there too.”
“Why, of course; did you think he *wasn’t* there?”
They stayed at the head of the stairs until the very end. None of the young men would venture to come up, for the whole uproar

was confined to the kitchen and dining room, except, of course, for Niobe's little cubbyhole, where the husk-like roll of coverings from which she had emerged to do their bidding could still be observed intact.

Now you must know that, right above the dining room where the young men were indulging their appetites and the gaiety of their hearts, was the bedroom of Giselda, who, having wakened with a start at their arrival, was writhing with fury at such a thing being tolerated. "The indecency of it! How monstrous!" She lit the lamp, looked at the clock. "Two o'clock! Two o'clock in the morning! A disturbance like that at two o'clock in the morning! Why, it's actually against the law! Why should we have to put up with a pack of swine like that?" But she took good care not to leave her room to make a protest, or indeed to give any sign of life. And although she did not know exactly what was happening, she pictured the faces of her sisters and of the servant at that moment; her instinct, now become acute, advised her not to get up, not to leave her room, not to move, not to interfere in any way—and it was good advice. "Half-witted idiots, to allow a pandemonium like that!"

When they went through into the big room the young men lowered their voices, for all the apparatus of work left there by the women imposed respect and awe upon them; they examined it, but without shouting or laughing. Sometimes they paused, enchanted, over a beautiful piece of silk and gold embroidery which they were able to admire merely by raising a white cloth; they raised it shyly between two fingers and examined it with childish wonder, talking in low whispers, their heads poking out from behind each other like a cluster of grapes, and then covered it up again with the greatest delicacy, as though it were a sleeping child. But on another occasion, when Remo opened a drawer and pulled out a chemise or a pair of exquisitely light pink or blue drawers and held them up in both hands, saying that they belonged to a very lovely girl of eighteen who was going to be married in a few days, all respect for the place and

the work went sky-high and uproar broke out again as previously in the dining room. Sergio knelt down in front of the drawers that Remo was holding up, and wanted to kiss them devoutly. And they all, one at a time, imitated his action, kneeling down before the drawers and wanting to kiss them, while Remo continued to hold them up in a mock-religious attitude.

“But what are they doing, what *are* they doing, I should like to know?” Shouts seemed to tear down the walls: exclamations of apostrophe, epithets, invocations accompanied the solemn ritual.

“They’ve pulled out a pair of drawers!” said Carolina, describing the scene. “They’re the Contessina del Piatta’s.”

“It was Remo who wanted to show them.”

“Goodness me!”

Replacing the minute drawers belonging to the Contessina, they pulled out those of a certain *marchesa* of very different proportions. There was an immediate outburst of shrieks and whistles and protests.

“It’s the Marchesa Stroppa Guioni’s drawers,” said Carolina in an ecstasy of delight, thinking of their size.

Teresa, too, thinking of that particular garment, was ready to burst with laughter.

Niobe, all amongst the young men, laughed till she could laugh no more.

Giselda, being unable to do anything else, was biting her sheet. “Just think of allowing such a thing at this time of night! Is nobody going to go and tell the police? The Superintendent ought to be written to!” She lit the lamp again and once more looked at the clock. “Four o’clock! This madness has gone too far. They ought to be shot!”

Then at last Remo, having said good-bye to his friends, who went off with horn blasts that finally woke the rest of the neighbourhood, retired to his room to bed. And Niobe, leaving the battlefield untouched to await her attention in a couple of hours’ time, delayed returning, for a brief space, to her own lair in order to go upstairs and give her mistresses an account of the

whole affair. They listened to her in astonishment and ecstasy, blinking their eyelids as each name was pronounced: "Corrado, Franco, Bruno, Massimo, Renzo, Gastone, Alfredo, Sergio, Jim . . ."—each name blossoming with the charm of a flower upon those old lips—and: "Remo, Remo, Remo . . ." repeated over and over again. The two sisters fell asleep again in a state of intoxication which brought with it a voluptuous slumber, a condition of sweet drowsiness, as though they could feel unknown hands upon their bodies, stroking, exploring, fondling them, gently rocking them against a languid, remote hum of voices.

As for Giselda, now in such a state of rage and nervous excitement that she was fit to burst, she was incapable of going to sleep again. She rolled about in the bed, she bit the sheets, she ground her teeth. "Not a wink of sleep to be had now, in this abominable house."

It must be recognized—and with legitimate pride—that everyone upon this earth is sensitive to beauty: when confronted with a young man of handsome, robust presence, with an exceptional harmony of features and a knowledge of how to wear his clothes with elegance and assurance, even the shirtmaker and the tailor are quite naturally induced to confide their wares to him and to wait patiently, for an incredible time, for them to be paid for. Remo's tailor, in fact, gave him very special terms—postponements, adjustments of bills, considerable reductions. Remo provided an advertisement that was not to be despised; he had become the centre of a constellation which, though bright, was not easy to define, a constellation consisting of young men who certainly were not exemplary workers and who raised no chorus of protest for the purpose of achieving that state at the earliest possible moment. It must be admitted, in fact, that they were all without any real professions, belonging, as they did, to families of perfect respectability but too mediocre or too humble for their own aspirations, and with a desire for living which was quite out of proportion to their resources. The result was that, if they were

incapable of perpetrating an evil action, they were, all of them, always ready to snatch at any good opportunity that might arise, however slight it might be; and they had a graceful manner of provoking such opportunities, or, if they arose naturally, of clinging on to them at once, even if they were of a rather doubtful nature. They cultivated various forms of sport, in which some of them were real champions, and had a passion for all of them, without distinction, so that they might be truly called young sportsmen. They adored motorcars and they all possessed one, whether a good or a bad one, calling themselves agents, or representatives, or dealers, or hirers of cars. They might truly be termed "motorists," since they exercised the profession of the motorcar exclusively for its own sake.

The tailor knew that, if Remo left him, a multitude of others might very easily follow, but that if he cherished him carefully he would be exercising a permanent attraction upon him; for it is not only women who are lured by the elegance and charm of luxury and fashion; men also have their feminine side, to a by no means negligible extent, even though remaining strictly true to their own sex. And in fact this young man, wherever he went, met with admiration and liking because, as we shall see later, his bearing with other men was very different from the way in which he usually behaved with women; while for the latter, too, he had a graduated method of treatment which could not escape the expert eye.

There was only one person in the neighbourhood of Santa Maria who had been able to resist him—Giselda. Ever since he had entered the house she had looked upon this guest with mistrust; ever since his first day she had felt herself to be in complete disagreement with her sisters. Until at last, mortified and crushed at finding no support for her own opinion, she had kept silent, nursing a feeling of acute resentment, waiting for the moment when she might repay herself for her reticence and humiliation. And the deep-seated cause of this must be sought in the fact that she herself had been attracted once and for all by the charms of

beauty and youth, and that there had remained in her heart, as a result of it, an unquenchable bitterness. Having suffered too deeply from that complaint, she was immune from its infection.

And Remo, ever since the very first day, had looked upon this third aunt in quite a different manner from the other two. She had at once rebuffed him, but he had continued to observe her, to see if there was no way by which he could come into contact with her and disarm the hostility of which he did not know the reason. As soon as he realized that there was no need to fear her—and not merely that, but that her enmity brought him great advantages by forcing the other two into exaggerated opposition—he sought every possible means of antagonizing her to the utmost, treating her in an ironical manner, calling her “madam,” or pretending to be frightened and anxious about her state of health: “Did you sleep badly last night? You don’t look at all well, perhaps a slight purge would put you right again”; openly defying her, treating her with contempt and wounding her feelings at all times and on all occasions. But she, understanding the game he was playing, refrained as far as she could from provoking him, conquering, with a great effort, her own impulses, accepting everything and keeping everything to herself. Sometimes her views had found a response in the neighbourhood amongst those who were less subservient to the power of the aunts and the charms of the nephew; for the haughtiness with which he had been imposed upon them and the formal manner in which they were expected to address him had stuck in the throats of many of them, while the punches he had distributed with such skill and such unstinting liberality, and the subsequent lack of interest shown in everyone except Palle, had left a certain amount of ill feeling here and there—sparks of hatred glowing beneath the ashes. But in the presence of the mistresses of the house rebellious voices became servile, just as, when confronted with him, they all went into ecstasies over the magnificent shoes which she, Giselda, had to clean; and over his suit, his shirt, or his beautifully

ties tie. Resentment and hostility changed to flattery, murmurings into openmouthed admiration.

Giselda, who at bottom was a proud and noble spirit, was loth to give vent to the feeling of hardship from which she suffered in her own family, and had had recourse to this only when she had felt herself strangled with bitterness and loneliness. In the house she no longer opened her mouth, for her sisters were altogether too ready to answer her back, to display their delight in doing exactly the opposite to what she thought right, to do things which would deeply displease her, to provoke her open hostility, to place her in a desperate, extreme, impossible position. For some time she had been making superhuman efforts not to give herself away, to keep all her own thoughts concealed, shutting herself up completely so as not to expose herself to snubs and become the butt of endless jokes.

The thing the two sisters loved most of all was the attitude of superiority and contempt that Remo had adopted towards her; nothing gave them more pleasure than the thrust that was aimed directly at her by him, thus sparing them the trouble of attacking her themselves. Even Niobe, kind and generous soul as she was, was delighted with the way in which Remo treated this amphibious creature, this servant whom yet, to a certain extent, she had to serve, and who put on airs and claimed to despise a young man whose like the countryside had never boasted and could not boast now, and who was the admiration of all. Confronted with Giselda's hard expression, Niobe would make signs to Remo behind her back, her own face, in contrast, always serene, and would wink at him, indicating the other woman's long, sulky face. Remo would reply with a sigh, knowing that the faithful old woman would support him in every trouble—an ironical sigh aimed at the unconquerable, yet so completely conquered, fortress, a sigh which alluded to the energetic resistance which had been so harmful and so useless to her but, to him, so providential.

And now Giselda, whose voice had ceased to be of any use in communal life, began—from the first floor of the house while she

was attending to her domestic duties, or as she sat shut up in her own room—to sing: she sang often and she sang loudly and clearly, and the more she was aware of a storm brewing on the floor below, the more, and the better, she sang. She sang every sort of thing—songs and ballads, vulgar airs, and, in particular, old tunes from popular operas. She sang everything she knew, just as it came into her head; so that her lyrical outpourings mingled, from above, with the squall that raged below.

It must be admitted that she did not sing badly, and that, though untrained, she had a by no means ugly voice, that she knew how to modulate it harmoniously, and that she sang perfectly in tune; and the more the passers-by in the road below raised their heads to listen, the more confidence she gained in the exercise of her art.

It is impossible to describe the degree of vexation to which the two sisters were reduced by all this singing. They felt their hearts sink right down to the bottom of their stomachs, and even lower; for she knew by instinct, as it were, the most favourable moment to start—which was, of course, the least favourable for them. And they would explore every word of the songs she sang, trying to detect in them some insult directed at their own persons, some particular point or double meaning, some allusion that referred to them, some hidden jest, so that they might rise up and silence her, some intended damage to their own power and authority. Nothing: there was never anything. Giselda knew just how to avoid danger, with the most exquisite skill; it was impossible to catch her out or get the better of her. And there was no knowing how she managed to avoid so many dangers all at the same time: she could walk through the flames without even the hem of her garment being singed.

It might be that there was a discussion, long or short, about a bill to be paid, or a lively scene on account of the existence and the surprising amount of such a bill. It might be that protests were being made on account of the considerable difference that Palle made in the household, since he never left his friend's side and

was always there for meals, with a first-class appetite; and when they were out, as the aunts well knew, Remo paid for both of them. Meanwhile, at home, Palle's mother repeated feelingly: "Lord, Thy will be done, always and in all places." Certainly, without doubt, she was right, you could not say she was wrong; she might well thank the Lord, she might well surrender herself to His will, for what He was doing He was doing well. . . . From the first floor the voice sang:

*"Gipsy girls are we,
We come from a far-off land;
Your future we can see
By looking in your hand."*

At first, when Remo had made friends with Palle, the aunts had been considerably vexed at his choice. That he should pick out, from amongst so many young men, the most luckless, the least favoured of fortune, the roughest, the clumsiest, the worst dressed, one who, in his own home, could not be given the care that an adolescent requires, one who would turn into a labourer of the humblest kind . . . : while they, on their side, already had exalted ideas for their nephew's future. But the deep and genuine cordiality with which Remo treated his companion, the warmth in his voice when he spoke to him—"Hi, Palle; listen, Palle; come along, Palle"—a warmth which he had for no one else; this, coupled with the devotion with which his friend followed him everywhere, left them in a state of perplexity when they wished to reprove him; and finally, swayed by the vanity that pervaded them, they kept an admiring silence, seeing in Palle nothing more than the shadow of their nephew. Remo had taken to himself a bodyguard, a retainer, a servant—which was merely a further confirmation of his cleverness and his power. The fact that he made his retainer sit at table with him, the shadow which, at mealtimes, turned into the solidest kind of substance—these, little by little, became a confirmed habit and did not cause them any renewed feeling of annoyance. Remo had

taken to saying: "Come on, Palle, it's lunch time; have lunch with me today." And Palle, after some uncertainty the first few days, would accept without the invitation having to be repeated; and the aunts themselves, seeing how pleased the two young men were to be together, ended by taking pleasure in this not inconsiderable addition to the household, in this innovation which had transformed their hurried, frugal repast into an hour's recreation. But when they went through the accounts with Niobe and discovered that the household expenses were, for some extraordinary reason, three times as much as before, and were feeling bewildered, excited, and unable to express their thoughts in face of this phenomenon, there came floating down from the first floor:

*"A warrior I would be
If all my dreams came true,
An army I would lead . . ."*

And Palle's mother, meanwhile, repeated in ecstasy: "Lord, Thy will be done, always and everywhere."

As I have already remarked, it might have been supposed that these two young men had been drawn and kept together by very strong natural affinities, but such an ordinary, facile supposition does not apply in this case. Affinities often bring about friendships that are superficial and fragile, being based merely on interests in common, and that are also, sometimes, shallow or treacherous, concealing profound rivalries and jealousies, and leading easily to disappointments and shocks. In this case it may be said that a rivalry which worked itself off in an act of violence brought them together, and that natural differences united them and kept them closely bound to each other, all in one flash. To dare, to live in order to dare, this was their maxim; clear-cut, conscious in the one, in the other instinctive, unformed.

Remo, physically, was extremely beautiful and of aristocratic bearing, Palle's figure insignificant and hopelessly plebeian; and this made the latter appear timid beside his companion, whose dashing qualities were obvious, and who was indeed more dash-

ing than he was, and with much more pride and assurance. But to Remo this roughness was not unpleasing; in fact, he loved it and did nothing to lessen it or tone it down, liking the other to be himself just as much as he liked. And Palle cast no envious glances at his friend's clothes, which he liked to see him wearing, because it was right and proper; but he himself would not have lifted a finger to get others like them. Remo, temperamentally, was the one who commanded, Palle the one who obeyed: all Remo's daring had to be sifted by careful calculation, it had to be a means to its own ends, whereas Palle's mind was incapable of calculation, his daring disinterested, and in any enterprise he gave himself without asking himself what he was giving or what there was to take; he had to give, but in order to give he required a guide, a chief to follow, another person through whom to express himself. They were like a soldier and an officer, with the established principle that one commands and the other obeys; the difference in the tasks they perform has no more than a practical value; they are two hearts beating together for the same faith, and their exaltation of spirit is the same. But, since the battle was life itself and the combatants in this field are egoists—and often egoists of the blindest, fiercest kind—Remo was armed to the teeth for the fray, while his companion was entirely without arms; alone, he would have been inevitably crushed, he would have become a servant, a slave, a beast of burden like his father and mother. The innocent had need of the expert in order to win, and the expert derived great benefit from feeling this innocence at his side to redouble his own daring. Remo, really and truly, loved no one except Palle, and the boy who passed as his henchman represented the best part of himself.

The two youths looked out upon the world with its long, flat roads over which pass the young men who own fine motorcars, the fortunate ones who have plenty of money to spend and can change their cars as they please or fancy, who can attend all the competitions, and who, exalted as they are, have a brotherly feeling, through their shared passion, even with the humblest, and

feel themselves united with them, like gods with men. They looked out upon the world with its prodigious flights, before whose grandeur even the thought of death vanishes; with its vertiginous races, its intoxication with speed. They breathed the feverish atmosphere generated by these races, these competitions, by the need to dare, to rush, to rush faster and faster: all will power, all strength, all skill—all must be sacrificed to speed.

Palle was incapable of initiative. Remo felt the need of someone to follow him in his own enterprises, for the realization of which he was sharpening his wits; someone who would approve without discussion. The greatest joy, for both of them, was to sleep together in the same bed. Palle's happiness was visible when Remo said to him: "Stay and sleep here, stay with me." As he lay composedly curled up in the immense bed, under the great canopy of blue damask, Palle's bright little eyes would look slyly about him, and he could not help laughing and wondering where he was and what might be the meaning of such comic things. And, still laughing, he would fall asleep with the thought that his friend's first word in the morning would be the announcement of some plan—what they were to do, where they were to go; anticipating, too, the pleasure of having the plan told to him almost before he had opened his eyes, without having to wait for it—and without having to come and ask for it. And as for the other, he liked to feel the companion of his expedition close beside him from the very moment he opened his eyes.

They were both of them silent; they spoke little to anyone else and had no love of chatter; in fact, it bored them. One of them escaped it by means of his awe-inspiring demeanour, the other by removing himself bodily, in a childish sort of way, thrusting aside with elbow or shoulder those who said "Palle! Palle!" and wanted to poke their noses into his and Remo's business, particularly Remo's.

They understood each other by gestures, by monosyllables, by glances, by their own slang words; and both of them were perfectly at ease in talking of their own subjects with other men, in

asking for information, giving news, telling stories or joining in discussions. With Remo, the time that he dedicated to women was weighed out as carefully as gold: he looked upon them with coolness and indifference, as a field to be conquered in the shortest possible time. As for Palle, he felt as much disconcerted amongst women as if their skirts had been made of pitch, and he could hardly wait for the moment when he might disengage himself and take his departure. Women made him laugh and at the same time inspired him with fear; he was so completely male that he scarcely knew how to talk to them.

They were not sentimental, these two young men, nor had they developed any feelings of sensuality.

The love that Palle cherished for his mother was an ascetic love, hardly of this world, a love made up of devotion and admitting of no expression; and he loved his friend as an integral part of himself, just as he loved his own life. The sexual act, for Palle, was a thing psychologically extremely simple, but spiritually so exalted that he could not really understand how others could look upon it with such unconcern; if forced to speak of it he would turn away his face and laugh, just as, at table, he tried to hide behind his arm when he was eating; and he was drawn to it only by example, or rather when borne along by the current, and did not, out of virility, avoid it; but he retained in all circumstances a certain physical churlishness and manly modesty of his own. It seemed to him to be a thing that should not be done with such levity, and he could not manage to overcome his own unfavourable impression; it should happen only between two creatures who were united by an indissoluble bond and for whom the secrets of nature had been unveiled. The day that he spoke in an interested manner to a young woman, that young woman would be his wife: and he would make a faithful husband and a good father.

Amongst Remo's friends, who were free from prejudice, experienced, and whose tone was that of middle-class townsmen, Palle, with his hands in his pockets, his cap jammed down on his

forehead, and his stealthy walk, was in the position of an attendant dog: he was always there and it was just as though he were not there, he was always within reach when required and yet knew how to avoid his presence being felt even though he was there all the time. He took up no more room than a dog and was content to remain always exactly in his own place. Every now and then, just like a dog, he became the centre of the group, and they all had a certain affection and tenderness for him, even to the point of giving him a playful blow, or embracing him, or wanting to stroke him. Exactly like a dog. His rounded, massive shoulders and his smile, good-natured and at the same time cunning, were there for everyone.

The difference between Palle and his companion in this sphere was enormous. Remo was not dominated by sensuality either; in fact, he controlled it very firmly: but he had not been slow to understand the important part played in life by women and the great influence he could exercise over them, and what they represented in modern society. He retained, in all cases, his own coolness, his enigmatic attitude, and his faint, superior smile.

Palle also received one or two cuffs from Remo, inflicted by him in order to cut short some argument about which, owing to the too great distance between them, there could be no possible discussion.

To witness the complete unison of their differing personalities you had to observe them in front of a motorcar, busying themselves about it, poking into its entrails to repair the engine, to discover a breakage or a defect, to get it going again; and since they always had smashed or worn-out cars on hand, their skill was put to unheard-of tests. They were capable of bringing back a precarious kind of life to any old corpse. Palle's body was no longer a human body: it became a sphere, a wheel, an arch, a fork, an axle, a girder, a drill, a lever, a plug. He could make his body into anything for the business in hand. Remo's body, on the other hand, remained in all circumstances unchangeable: always it was a magnificent human body that revealed itself as it bent

and turned and twisted, a body through whose movements a soul was made manifest. The machine, too, was dominated by the man. Palle was its amorous and faithful servant, and so he remained when he mounted it and made it move; his figure seated upon it became a thing of necessity. But in the case of Remo the machine was not complete until its driver was in it: it seemed to be awaiting him, calling to him, as a woman, melancholy and alone, awaits her lover; and the moment he was seated in it, it surrendered itself to him, becoming one with him, every part of it converging towards his head, which remained the supreme master.

Again, to examine their diversity and their unity you had to observe them at some race or other—a track race or a road race, a race in the air or on the water. In order to attend these contests, wherever they might take place, they faced difficulties and dangers and all kinds of unknown trials; they went to them by all kinds of means, even the most absurd, including motorcars in a more than desperate condition. This was the faith that unites the hearts of men. When looking at a racing car in action Remo would lower his eyelashes until they joined, until they produced a shadow between his eyelids, as though he were focussing a telescope; yet the rest of his body would in no way betray his acute tension. Palle's eyes would become smaller and smaller, till they were hardly visible, as he bent gradually forward: they were like two sharp points, two arrows.

Their interpretation of life, therefore, of life as a thing to be lived from hand to mouth, was an athletic, adventurous one, and it gave the two young men a possibility of heroism that was, for them, a physical, a normal, an everyday thing; but a thing which unfortunately did not present itself to the full extent of their aspirations. If it had been demanded of them, either of them would, any day, have been capable of acts of great daring, which he would have performed with no concern but for the beauty of the act itself, without the faintest suggestion of sacrifice or self-interest crossing his mind.

Furthermore, if friends and acquaintances, members of the household and neighbours, and even those who entrusted their wares to him, were all responsive to beauty, it must be supposed that other categories of persons were responsive to beauty too.

It was something of a mystery how Remo, always evasive and indifferent to everyone around him, had managed for some time, and with a certain persistence, to keep an eye on his aunts' clientele. Pretending to find himself there by chance, appearing unconcerned or absent-minded, he observed the different types of women who came to the house on business. With all the respect and deference that the sisters had for their clients, they were overjoyed to tell them who was the young man in the doorway or at the gate, or manoeuvring a car just outside, or crossing the room, with perfect self-possession, on his way in or out. One glance was enough for them to feel they had the right to speak—a glance which its giver would often have preferred *not* to be intercepted by the two seamstresses, whose interest was, from that moment, diverted from discussions on the subject of drawers and chemises.

“He’s a nephew of ours.”

“Son of a sister of ours who died quite young at Ancona.”

“He’s lost both his parents.”

“He’s twenty-two.”

“He’s been living with us for eight years.”

If Remo was there, without taking this for a proper introduction he would give the lady and her younger companion a slight bow which was at the same time both respectful and utterly contemptuous—since he was unable to escape this hurriedly performed duty. In the meantime, with great rapidity, he would be observing the different types, and if possible would linger at the gate, not in order to see them go out and get into their car—in fact, he would not even turn round—but to give them plenty of time to look at *him*. And he took good care not to repeat his greeting, even in a cold, absent-minded way, now that the aunts were not looking, thus letting it be clearly understood that his

previous politeness had been directed towards *them* rather than towards the ladies themselves; nor would he interrupt a conversation with Palle in order to salute them. And being a past master at this art, he could tell exactly, without having to give them even a passing glance, how much interest he had aroused in them when, thinking his mind to be far away, they paused to examine him in a way they had not been able to before, in front of the others; nor was it easy to decide which of them was scrutinizing him with the greater intensity, the daughter or the mother. The former, on the eve of her marriage, would perhaps be making melancholy comparisons, taking her fill of admiration, since there is no faithful wife (to this adjective I will add no figures, not knowing the statistics) who—at least with her eyes—has not several times betrayed her husband.

When a priest arrived the aunts performed an official introduction, and Remo would eagerly grasp the hand that he, more friend than client, good-naturedly proffered. They would converse together on some subject or other, Remo smiling openly and becoming quite talkative, until the aunts looked at each other, wondering where all this eloquence and affability came from. With priests he made use of a special kind of technique which had nothing whatever to do with the procedure he adopted towards women or towards other men generally, and which was quite certain to captivate them: he pretended to speak his mind, like a big, carefree boy, in a frank, good-natured way, so that, if women had to run after him and then fail to get him, these priests went away assuring themselves that they had caught him on the wing and were carrying him off with them, whereas they had really caught nothing. When they went, they expressed their pleasure to the aunts: "A good-looking boy, very charming and lively; you must be pleased to have him here." They were quite unable to reply. Teresa's face, losing its hard, toil-worn look, became like a lump of wax melting in the heat, while Carolina had to cling tightly to her chair for fear of falling off. It was only when nuns appeared that Remo passed quickly by without even

turning round. And they in turn scuttled away, leaving an impression as though the encounter had caused a sign of the Cross to be made in the air. The aunts knew just how to take their revenge on such women: they would make them come back fifty times to find out whether the famous altar cloth or the famous alb was not yet finished, and would answer them disdainfully: "No, we haven't been able to do it yet."

For some time now a strange client of the two embroiderers who lived in a villa at Settignano had become an assiduous visitor of theirs; she was a Russian countess who had escaped by a miracle from Lenin's revolution and about whom there were many rumours and fanciful stories. Her husband, a politician under the old regime, had been killed in the revolution, and the Countess, having lost her own nationality, had become international, a daughter of the League of Nations. She had succeeded in escaping the storm by leaving casually for Paris when it broke out. She had, at that period, a house in Paris where she spent a great part of the year, and she appeared to have been able to save, at the same time, all, or most, of her wealth—or perhaps it had taken to its legs and run away in front of her; for she possessed magnificent motorcars, a villa, and servants, and led a luxurious and original life. Instead of surrounding herself with high-born ladies and gentlemen as her rank might lead one to expect, she had formed a circle consisting exclusively of young men devoted to sport. She was never to be seen with another woman. And although she had, from the material point of view, escaped from one terrible cyclone, another, just as inexorable, had been let loose in her mind: she had turned from an intellectual woman into a sportswoman. Kicking, punching, jumping, racing of every kind had taken the place of profound thought, of investigation into human affairs, of lyrical impulse and lyrical harmony, of learned discussion, whether brilliant or ponderous. As for her age, she cheerfully admitted to thirty-nine, but it was easy to see why the Countess had wanted to come to a full stop at the farthest limit of this fourth span of the bridge of life—not at all, however,

in the manner of a whining, supplicating beggar, or even a suspicious, watchful one, nor of a child who turns capricious and howls and makes a scene and, having once come to a halt, cannot be made to go on again. Her proper place was well beyond the fifth span.

The Materassis were creating for her, out of the very finest material, a special garment of her invention which she called "lily combinations" and which she had adopted when she first came to live in Florence in honour of the floral emblem of that hospitable city—a chemise with drawers attached which clung closely to the body at the level of the breasts and the top of the thighs, like the perfumed calyx from which they took their name.

From the first greeting between Remo and the Countess there arose—on the subject of motorcars—a real, proper conversation. They used to see each other every day on the Settignano road, and Remo knew, by report, the lady who looked at him so persistently but without succeeding in making him return her look; for Remo, instead of looking at her, would be examining, with the greatest interest, her various motorcars, so very different from the ones in which he himself was forced to go backwards and forwards along that same road. She came upon him more than once in a broken-down car, struggling to get it going again. And the Countess laughed, she laughed and laughed inordinately. And Remo, instead of taking offence at her teasing, laughed with her over the poverty of his own resources, considering that he set out to be a car dealer and representative; he took the whole affair with great spirit, while all the time a decision was forming itself inside his head—that, to a young man like himself, a good car was indispensable, and that the time was now past for old wrecks at two or three thousand lire apiece, which could be kept going only by his own and Palle's heroism; the possession of a respectable vehicle was becoming as necessary as his daily bread. So thought Remo as he laughed with the Countess. But when she proposed to him point-blank that he should go with her to Settignano to see her villa he refused with a spontaneity equal to her

own, giving as his reason that he had to go to Florence. There was a moment's pause in the lady's gaiety, and then she started laughing again as if nothing had happened: she was not a woman to let herself be overwhelmed by untoward events, and she went on laughing as she got into her car and saluted Remo in such a way that it was impossible to tell whether she wanted to carry away something of him or leave him something of herself. In neither case did Remo appear eager, whether to accept what was so generously offered, or to yield up what was laughingly demanded.

Two days later the Countess came back to see about new and slight variations in her "lily combinations," of which the Materassis, this time, were to make her a whole dozen.

Remo was there waiting for her.

The conversation was resumed, and turned to more personal subjects; and when the Countess left, Remo accepted her invitation and got into her car to go to Florence.

Two days more; and another visit. The Countess was now there every day, and came, of course, because she had not succeeded in shifting the basis upon which they met and creating a new one. If she wanted to see Remo she had to go and look for him there, in the only place where he allowed himself to be caught. And when, on her way out, she invited him to go to Florence with her, he took advantage of her invitation with the greatest coolness and got into the car; but when she suggested taking him to Settignano to see her villa, he gave a prompt and decided refusal, to the Countess's steadily growing disappointment: he had something he must do, he had to go into the town, where he was expected, he was already late and must hurry, he called Palle to start up the old roasting jack, the coffee grinder, the steam engine, as he laughingly called it to the Countess; and if it was ready he would jump in quickly, after having accompanied the lady to her own car.

All the time she remained there—which tended to grow longer and longer—they would wander up and down in front of the

house, along the low wall like two sentries, talking about sport, about nothing but sport, the only subject on which it was possible to hold a conversation with Remo, and the only one for her too, now, since she had become so excessively sporting, having deserted, without regret, the realms of the spirit. She was the friend of all the most celebrated and various champions of the moment, who could be met at her villa—champions of wrestling, fencing, boxing, football, swimming, rowing, diving, jumping, water polo and basketball, cyclists and walkers, airmen and racing motorists. She herself indulged in some of these activities, being a good oarswoman and a powerful swimmer; she went in for fencing too, and had a swimming pool at her house, and every morning, before her plunge, she performed exercises with the dumbbells and on the parallel bars. But this was not the only reason why the shrewd inhabitants of Settignano called her villa the "Gymnastic Club." . . . She never missed a race or a match or a competition, and there was no place nor weather that could put her off or frighten her. During the contest she would grow so enthusiastic that she was ready to fight any other woman. As an adoptive Roman, it was a familiar gesture, to her, to fling her beret to the winner at the end of a match. Unkind people said that, even though the Countess's name and coat of arms and address were printed inside, not all the berets returned to the place they came from. And as once upon a time in Paris her house had been frequented by the most famous painters and sculptors, musicians, men of letters and philosophers, and she had presided for many years at their discussions, shared their intellectual torments, and enjoyed their intimacy and friendship, so now, as a consequence of the conversion we have already mentioned, by which she passed over to the other side, to physical action, which solves all problems, she rejected her former friends *en masse*, calling artists and their kind "emmerdants," and professors and philosophers, with their peculiar morals and their pessimistic doubts, "vieux cocus." There is no better philosophy than that which finds its expression through the legs and arms, in the open air,

keeping the brain intact, whereas it is from the swollen condition of the latter that all other philosophies derive. "*Je suis grecque*," the Countess would repeat vivaciously, throwing overboard, bag and baggage, her Genevan nationality, "I am Greek"; adding that the Italians are the natural heirs of Greece, and that the youth of Italy is the best of all, well balanced "*dans sa chaleur*," and that she had found "formidable" material in Tuscany. She had found—to put it plainly—Man. And certainly poor old Diogenes must have looked at her from the other world with envy, and with some anger too, after having hunted for him so long and so vainly with his lantern; and must have said, biting his lips: "Just look who it was who found him!"

All these conversations took place as they walked up and down in front of the house an infinite number of times—a number of times which tended to increase with each visit.

At first the Materassis, every time the pair passed in front of the door, would automatically raise their heads without looking at each other; then they took to not even turning their heads, but remaining bent over their work, whatever the tone of the conversation might be, whether they were talking in loud or subdued voices, or whether the lady fired up angrily or went into fits of shrill laughter. And it must not be thought that they grew accustomed to this performance or endured it with placid resignation, for they could feel their bile stirring and their blood boiling, and they became more and more furious with this woman for her method of procedure, for her insolent voice and her ridiculous figure, and for her visits to them, the real reason of which was now, quite shamelessly, revealed through the excuse of the chemises. First, during the various phases of these conversations, they would feel as if they were frozen in an icehouse and then baked in an oven. If only Giselda would make herself heard from the first floor! Not a bit of it. She sang only when she ought to have kept quiet; she never did anything that might be agreeable to her sisters. Now that her voice, with some little rhyme appropriate to the occasion, would have been like an intervention from

heaven, the infernal creature was as dumb as a fish. And, still without raising their heads, they would throw in comments, exploding because they could not bear it any longer, otherwise they would have burst. When the Countess asserted gaily that she was thirty-nine: "Where's your cradle?" exclaimed Teresa, and Carolina clinched the matter with: "Shameless hussy! Add another twenty to that!" And they took to crowning her remarks as though they were reciting responses to a litany.

"Charming she must look, rowing!"

And if she said she liked swimming: "Hope you'll drown!" Or that she was fond of fencing: "May you come to a sticky end!"

"I should love to see her jumping."

"Like a bear, I should think!"

"Perhaps she'll break her neck."

"She ought to be impaled."

And they were indignant with Lenin for having killed such a lot of excellent people and then let a baggage like that escape.

The Countess now took not the slightest notice of them, but behaved as though she were in a café, not even glancing at them, and then went away without taking her leave.

They spoke to Remo about it. These visits must come to an end, they said; for the good name of the family, that woman must be sent packing without more ado. Remo replied with perfect simplicity that he himself had nothing whatever to do with these visits, and that if the Countess lingered there it was not his business to send her away, for he was not the master of the house and he could not be rude to someone who showed him kindness.

Then the aunts made a heroic resolution: to put aside all other work, and to work at night as well as by day to finish the "lily combinations" in as short a time as possible, and so get rid of this importunate client.

In the space of a week the twelve pairs of combinations were completed and at once delivered by Giselda, with the bill, to the Countess. And since, the time before, they had charged her sixty lire a pair—the price which had been agreed between them—

now, in order to pick a quarrel and provoke a discussion in which they would behave in such a way as to settle her once and for all, they charged her seventy-five.

Next morning the Countess's car stopped outside and the chauffeur got out, carrying a parcel and an envelope containing the bill and the money to settle it. The Countess had paid without even a murmur at the increased price. In the parcel was the material for another dozen chemises, to be made, this time, at their convenience; she herself would come and discuss the design and embroidery for them.

The Materassis paused in bewilderment, with the money and the material in their hands, not knowing what action to take. Teresa signed the receipt in a preoccupied manner, as though she were signing some important deed, and then, once they were alone, they stood looking at each other. "What's to be done? What *are* we to do?"

That same day, after lunch, as soon as Giselda had gone away, Remo requested an interview with the aunts on an important subject. He had now reached the age of twenty-two, he said, the time had come for him to think of settling down to some regular way of life, and he had in view certain possibilities that he did not intend to let slip—the position of representative, for the Florence area, for a new car that was destined to have a great success. But in order to get into touch with the firm that produced it and get what he wanted from them, he himself must be in possession of a car of the value of thirty-five thousand lire. His future depended on this step being taken.

"Thirty-five thousand lire?"

"To be paid by instalments."

The sisters had never heard such a large sum spoken of in such a simple manner. Figures had meant long and laborious stages in their lives, like the climbing of inaccessible mountains whose peaks they had attained by the utmost self-sacrifice. Up to that day it had been a question of two or three thousand lire for a bill to be paid, to meet this or that need, or the daily household

expenses; this figure frightened them, and they had not the strength to rise in rebellion against it or to refuse it outright, to bid defiance to a request completely out of proportion to their way of thinking, even more than to their actual potentialities. They bowed their heads to indicate a mute and painful negative, as if they had received a mortal blow.

"It doesn't matter," answered Remo calmly and resignedly; "I understand, I quite understand, I know you're right."

Then, turning to Palle, he told him to get the car ready, as he would be away for two days, and—most unusual—he would go alone. Meanwhile he went up to his room to pack a bag. When the bag was ready and the car arrived, what was the astonishment of the aunts to see him go off not, as usual, in the direction of Florence, but the opposite way, along the Settignano road.

They had not even the courage to mention their suspicions, or the name of that woman. Two days passed in a gloomy silence which stifled all questioning, and then Remo reappeared at Santa Maria in a magnificent car.

It was a sad home-coming. Instead of bringing cheerfulness with it, the splendour of the car reflected only the distress and sorrow in the house. On the one side there was silence and indifference, on the other a silence heavy with reproof and menace.

After two days of this uneasy atmosphere, of this silence which on one side became more and more heavy and leaden, on the other more and more airy, it was the nephew who broke the ice with his usual naturalness and with a smile upon his lips that was almost sweet—with a sweetness, however, that the aunts would have been unwise to find too alluring.

"Well, now, won't you tell me what the matter is?"

Not expecting such a beginning, the two women looked at each other in terror, feeling already at a loss in face of their questioner, who, getting no reply, quietly repeated, articulating each syllable clearly:

"What is the matter?"

They looked at each other again twice, then, when they thought they had found the key to the difficulty, they looked at him.

"We want an explanation," said Teresa, recovering from her bewilderment and facing the ordeal squarely.

"What about?"

"How did you get that car?"

Remo made it clear that he was willing to be as patient as possible, and even, up to a point, submissive. He spoke as though anxious to convince them.

"I simply must have the car, as I have already told you. It's indispensable. I have got to open up a career for myself, to make myself a position; I can't go on any longer like this. I hope to become the representative, for the Florence area, of this or some other car. And then . . . and then . . . even if I don't succeed in that, the car will have been of use just the same; a good car is like a good suit, it has a value which you ought to appreciate better than anybody, but which you show that you don't understand; the world is made like that, and I hope to achieve what I'm aiming at."

"And how did you manage to pay for it?"

Teresa had already started on the question-with-answer-attached mode of conversation, while Carolina stared at Remo greedily, with eyes shining, already convinced by his statements.

"Since you refused me your help, that is a thing that does not concern you."

Teresa now raised her voice in order to conceal from her nephew that she had gone over to his side.

"It does concern us, yes sir, it does concern us, it concerns us a lot, it concerns us very much indeed; as you form part of our family we have both the right and the duty to know certain things about you." She raised her voice even higher. "This is a house without any mysteries, and it has always been so. Our lives are like an open book, and we don't want any change in that respect." The voice went even higher. "Our lives can bear the full light of the sun. That's our system and it always will be."

Remo, who had observed the exact point at which his aunt had crossed the bridge, now allowed her her full flow of oratory, bowing sadly beneath a weight which pressed so painfully upon his beautiful, glossy, wavy, well-brushed head, that head which seemed able to preserve forever upon itself the imprint of youth.

"In any case . . . I have to pay for it by instalments. I have to send the first instalment by tomorrow." He made as though to go away, and pretended he had not noticed his aunt's sigh of relief.

"So the car hasn't been paid for?"

"No, not so far."

"And you'll have the amount tomorrow?"

"Without fail."

"Where are you getting it from?"

"I've told you, that doesn't concern you."

"I repeat that it does concern us very much indeed; we can't allow you to get money from illicit sources. Where are you getting it from—from that Russian woman at Settignano? Does she provide motorcars?"

Remo did not answer; he looked very much as if he were saying to himself: "No indeed . . . she's not such a fool as that." But he let the aunts think quite the contrary.

"As a friendly loan, one can accept it from anybody."

"But not from that woman, no, no, not from that woman . . ."

The thought of that woman made Teresa lose patience, as she did when the Countess walked up and down in front of the door, joking and laughing with the young man. "Not from her, d'you understand? There are certain women you can't take money from; we know quite well what *their* friendship means. And how d'you intend to pay it back?"

"As soon as I possibly can."

"How much is the first instalment?"

"Twelve thousand lire"; he articulated the words carefully.

As before, when she had heard the news that the car had not been paid for, Teresa was again relieved at this figure.

"Good-bye, it's late, I'm late already, I must go." Remo ran

quickly upstairs and came down again after a few moments. "I shan't be home for supper this evening; good-bye," he repeated, rushing through the room like an arrow from the bow.

"Wait! Listen!"

At Teresa's call he stopped in the doorway, in the attitude of one who has no time to listen.

"Wait! . . . If it's true that the car is necessary to you so that you can make yourself a position, open up a new road in life"—Teresa said this, but she quite failed to see what road her nephew could open for himself by means of this motorcar—which indeed opened all roads to his easy, speedy passage—"we've decided to pay for it for you. In any case, if you had been willing to study, we should have laid out money on your behalf, and so we'll buy the car for you—but on one condition: that you promise not to have anything to do with that woman. A young man of your age can't have relationships with women like that; we don't want to hear any more about her, or her material, or her chemises, or her drawers; she can go and get them made where she likes, by anyone she likes, in hell itself if she likes; we shall send everything back to her, we've no intention of working for her, we don't ever want to see her again. . . ."

It might well have been thought that Teresa was obsessed, not so much by the cost of the car as by the idea of that accursed woman. And Remo, who understood certain things even before they came into existence, himself having a legitimate paternity in the matter, now appeared as if his mind were all tied in knots, whereas his conduct was decided and clear-cut—appeared to be caught up in some desperately complicated fatality—and then concluded like someone who seizes upon a sudden inspiration:

"I know . . . I can take her material back to her myself; that will be the most convincing proof for everybody concerned."

Teresa's eyes sparkled at this sublime idea, and Carolina drew herself up from the waist with such suddenness and energy that she looked as if she had broken in two.

At that moment Palle drew up before the gate with the car.

“Give it to me, then.” He took the still untouched parcel of material under his arm and started to go. Then he stopped and came back into the middle of the room.

“On one condition.” The two women trembled with fear at this condition, so remote from anything they could imagine. “In half an hour I shall be back here. You must be ready, and we’ll go out for a drive, and we’ll all stay on this evening in Florence and have dinner together.”

And when they looked at him in terror, without moving, like soldiers being invited to desert, he put down the parcel and took them round their waists and forced them to get up and remain up, and took their work out of their hands and put it aside.

“Now, now, come along, quickly; I shall be back in half an hour. Mind you’re ready, don’t keep me waiting *too* long.”

Niobe, in the doorway, her hands on her hips, was laughing, laughing all over, and as she laughed the two big rolls of flesh which met at her waist shook up and down, giving the impression that they were two immense swollen lips and that she was laughing with them as well.

“That’s right, come along, that’s the way,” she kept repeating as she watched his resolute action, which was like the spark that sets off a revolt by upsetting some ancient, venerated order hitherto considered eternal and infallible. “Come along, that’s the way, that’s right!”

The poor aunts at last rushed off up the stairs as if they were being pursued, and Remo, taking the parcel under his arm again, ran out to the car.

The Countess kept him waiting a little, giving orders to the servant to show the gentleman into the drawing room. But Remo refused, saying he was in a great hurry. He remained standing in the entrance hall, with the parcel of material under his arm, like a tradesman.

When the Countess appeared she was astonished to find him standing there like that with the parcel.

“I was meaning to stop at your aunts’ house this very day.”

"Forgive me, Contessa, and please also forgive my aunts, who are—how shall I express it?—capricious, and rather queer in some ways. But they're made like that, poor dears, and at their age there's nothing to be done about it. They're quite remote from life, they've never known anything except hard work, and it's made them whimsical and strange. . . . They get ideas into their heads, crazy fancies . . . and they very easily do very stupid things. But it's not their fault, and one has to forgive them; they're really very good creatures in spite of everything. Here is your material. They say they don't feel they can undertake any more of this kind of work, which is so complicated and requires so much attention."

Remo spoke in a gay, ironical manner, the irony, which was entirely at the expense of the aunts, disguising the true insolence of his attitude and of his words. And the Countess, understanding the real significance of both, gradually ceased laughing, but concealed, very skilfully, her own disappointment.

"It doesn't matter, it doesn't matter; leave it there, put down the material there, I'll get it made up by someone else, it's of no importance whatever. . . ." But, being still determined to see clearly into the whole affair, she tried, instead of giving the young man his dismissal, to detain him, and since he seemed to be in a hurry she walked with him down the path, as far as the gate of the villa.

"Oh! What a lovely car! Is it new?"

"Absolutely new."

"At last you've done it, that's splendid. . . . Have you just bought it?"

"Two days ago," answered Remo, bowing slightly, as though he wanted to thank the Countess—for what?

"Ha! Ha! You aim high! That's splendid, you're quite right, you're doing very well indeed. . . ." She was speaking to him now as a fellow comrade, with a manly note in her voice. "Splendid, splendid, you're absolutely right. . . ."

"Well, if one can . . . why shouldn't one aim high?"

“Why, of course, of course.”

“There are women in this world who want a lot for a little—or for nothing. . . .” The Countess looked at him questioningly. “And there are others who *give* everything for a little—or for nothing.”

“And you’ve found one like that?”

“Well . . . I wonder . . . perhaps.”

“Splendid; I’m really quite delighted about it.”

The Countess had understood everything, or assumed that she had, and laughed heartily. They laughed together, like good comrades. Further, the Countess let it be understood by her good humour that, if he could get everything for nothing, she too could find goods of the best quality at a more suitable price. They laughed together. They were two men now, talking about their affairs and interests, all of which were going swimmingly.

“But even the others end by giving something,” concluded Remo in a tone of polite gratitude.

“Ha! Ha! Ha!”

“Ha! Ha! Ha!”

The Countess laughed even louder, and Remo, interrupting her peals, bowed and took his leave.

After all this laughter with the Countess, the face that knew so well how to retain the imprint of youth grew dark and silent, like the face of a child who learns the naked realities of life. On the way home, after a long silence and a deep sigh, he made the following remark to himself, turning to Palle: “Yes, my dear Palle, the money is all in the hands of the old.” That was all he said, and he did not add whether he himself knew what could be done to transfer it into the hands of the young. Palle looked at him and laughed, as though he had said that two and one make three—a thing he had always known; and *he* did not know the answer.

When shortly afterwards Giselda saw her two sisters, all a-sparkle and a-flutter, getting into that beautiful motorcar and taking their seats in it, with chests thrown out and feathers fly-

ing, amidst an assemblage of ecstatic, adoring spectators, she had not the strength to sing; she would have liked to sing but she could not manage it, for her breath was tied up in a knot inside her windpipe, blocking it almost completely; and she had to thank Heaven that there was just enough passage space left for her to be able to breathe. And Niobe, standing there in the midst of the exultant populace, the only one of them capable of closing her mouth, followed her mistresses with her eyes, and with open arms, as they were driven away.

“Well, well, that’s fine, that’s a very good thing; we only live once; you go along and have a little fun too, you poor unfortunates!”

That beautiful motorcar had changed many things at Santa Maria. With its help Remo, in his ascent, had made a most notable upward leap. He was at last on his own level, and in a worthy setting. And in that worthy setting there was also Palle, who, looking after the car, manoeuvring it into position, or wandering idly round and round it, without worries of any kind, now seemed like a retired employee; for with this car there were no fears or surprises, nor had he to sweat blood in order to make it go; he was now a lover in ecstasy before the object of his love, now the custodian of a shrine, ready to drive off, at the rope’s end, any profaning touch. The aunts had come to know the outside world—theatres, cafés, restaurants. At least once a week Remo would take them out, would force them to go out with him: they had their fill of it.

Teresa had acquired the courage to sit down at a restaurant table, read the menu, and give her order. But Carolina’s legs would tremble and she would whisper to her sister: “You do it, you do it, you give the order. Yes, yes, that’s all right, that’s all right for me too.” And, beyond this basic subject, they were hardly capable of uttering a syllable. But there was one exclamation which they could never restrain and which was repeated always in identical form:

"Is that woman a bad lot? Are they bad lots, those two women there?"

And Remo invariably replied:

"Why, what on earth d'you mean? Why d'you think so? They're just two young ladies. They're two ladies. She's a respectable lady."

"But . . ." They were struck dumb. They did not appear convinced. And a moment later they would burst out again:

"But that one there—surely? You can't tell us *she* isn't. One can see all too clearly what *she* is."

"Why, of course not. Certainly not," Remo would repeat.

"That one over there, then—you can't deny that *she* is."

"No, she's not. She's the friend of that young man who's with her."

"The friend? And what does that mean?"

"They live together."

"Ah! She's a loose woman."

"And that one there?"

"She's a dancer. She dances at the Imperial."

They looked at each other in confusion, then made an effort to recover themselves, to endure the notion that they too might be taken for loose women, for ex-dancers.

Instead of keeping them concealed, of taking them to out-of-the-way, modest places, Remo always took them to the most crowded and glittering ones, the places that he himself habitually frequented, where many people knew him; and these, not knowing who the women were whom he had with him, would greet him laughingly or open their eyes very wide. "But who's he got with him, I should like to know? Who are those two old hags? Where on earth have they come from? Where did he dig them up?"—continuing all the time to stare at them as though they were rare beasts. "He's with his aunts, they're his aunts, he's brought his aunts out to dinner, he lives with them, they all live together. . . ." But few men are susceptible to the grotesque in women, or pay it only scant attention, keeping their whole in-

terest for the beautiful ones. And he himself, when asked for information, gave it as follows: "They're my trained monkeys; every now and then I give my monkeys a little air. I take out my parrots to show them; I need some money, I want to build a shed." And he, who knew so very well how women dress, who liked the smartest, the young, the beautiful, never gave them the smallest piece of advice, never found the slightest fault with their getup, to make them look just a little less comic; indeed it seemed that the more comic they looked the more they pleased him. He allowed them to be themselves without reserve, provided they were content; and he even coaxed them to Viareggio and Montecatini during the summer.

The two recluses saw the world, saw life, saw where and how the women existed who wore under their outer garments the fruit of their labours, of their love, the women whom they had served with blind loyalty for forty years. They were dazzled and troubled, attracted and discouraged. When they came back to Santa Maria and took up their work again, they looked round hesitatingly, they sighed, they yawned before they could start again. Where indeed was truth? they seemed to be asking themselves. These fascinating, mysterious flights, which opened their eyes and made them see so many things, were aging them, were taking from them their freshness and energy and faith, and as they worked they felt indifferent, absent-minded, their thoughts wandered far away, and their clients had to repeat things to make themselves understood—those same things that they had always understood even before they were expressed. They refused work that was too elaborate, aiming merely at the useful—and at the greatest possible quantity of it, since the need of money was intense and urgent. Their clientele, too, was changing gradually and was no longer what it had once been, for they accepted second-rate jobs from inferior people, choosing means of making money as quickly as possible and trusting to the incompetence and doubtful taste of a less refined, less knowledgeable class. Moreover, their eyes, in spite of thicker and thicker lenses, now

demanded to be released from the great adventures of the needle. They had taken pupils in order to have their help and so be able to carry through a greater amount of work. And they looked upon their work coldly, conscious of its weight as of a yoke on their necks, merely as the indispensable source of money to be gained. Previously they would have stigmatized any piece of work which they did not consider to be perfect in every detail and worthy of their name, and would have regarded it as irreparably tarnished; now they shrugged their shoulders and finally decided that what they were doing was already too much, and seemed to take a positive delight in noticing how little other people understood about tricks and makeshifts and shortcomings, how easy it was to deceive them and to pass off as the genuine article a quality of workmanship that was merely apparent. They sought help from inferior or inexpert hands, and they treated the work like a person whom one has loved too much, with all one's being, and whom, at a certain moment, one ceases to love; that person, in whom it had been impossible to discover any point or any action that was not beautiful, perfect, in relation to whom no doubt, no uncertainty, no suspicion could be admitted nor tolerated on the part of others, was now laid open to criticism and exposed to sceptical remarks, now displayed furrows and wrinkles; there was a bitter pleasure in recognizing this, and it was spoken of with detachment. How far away were the days when Carolina had transfused her own blood into the wounds of Christ on the Cross and held her own soul suspended in the incorporeal purity of the Host, upon the Holy Father's stole!

Even the neighbourhood was no longer the same as in the days when the two sisters used to sit in the window to enjoy the Sunday-afternoon parade, or scamper out to the gate to watch the soldiers go by; in vain, now, was the military march past, the blowing of trumpets, the singing of songs patriotic or sentimental, the rumbling of the gun carriages that shook the house. And for many years now they had not even been to Fiesole for the fair on the fourth of October. No one now ventured inside the

gate without a convincing, important reason—never merely to pass the time of day; for their welcome, as well as the attitude of the visitor, was too much changed. Nor did they trouble to find out what was going on outside their own house, which absorbed them completely. The neighbours ran out of their houses only in order to watch them drive off in the car, for the distance between them had become too great. This distance had been steadily widening ever since Remo's arrival.

Remo was loved by nobody in the neighbourhood, but—as always with the strong—he was feared and respected by all. "Poor Materassis! Poor Materassis!" they would say when speaking of him, asking themselves where he got the money to lead the gay life he did, for of work there was never any question. Every spiteful, envious word breathed admiration. The girls likened him to the most dazzling gods of the cinema, and there was no knowing how often, as a fairy prince, he appeared in their dreams. His figure was enchanting as a piece of sculpture. "Poor Materassis!" they never tired of repeating. And when they saw them driving off in the car: "They've taken to the gay life! . . . Just like his grandfather!" they would say, laying the blame for their weaknesses on their nephew. Or "Just like their father!"—laying the blame upon the aunts. One hour of aberration and recklessness nullified, pitilessly, sixty years of sorrow and sacrifice. And if sometimes Remo exchanged a few words with somebody, that person would consider it a personal honour and would tell everyone the conversation he had had with him, adding a good deal on his own account, of course, boastful at knowing him, at being able to speak with him, at being his friend, at receiving his confidences and enjoying his intimacy.

A vague shadow had for some days been hovering over the house and had been growing mysteriously, imperceptibly darker; and it was Niobe who had the privilege of revealing its cause, transferring it, with infinite secrecy and circumspection, from her own custody to that of her mistresses. Niobe, for the first

time, had become thoughtful and serious in face of life's vicissitudes.

At last, one day, trusting to one of Remo's absences and having sent Giselda to Florence with an endless list of commissions, they caused a young woman to be introduced by the back door and brought through the kitchen into the dining room.

An ambush? A rape? A conspiracy? An escape?

The atmosphere that gathered and hung around this apparition was fantastic enough to justify any possibilities of romance or drama. The thing that most thrilled the imagination was the girl's prodigious beauty; she was tall and fair, with a superb figure, very large dark blue eyes, red lips, and faintly pink cheeks. It would be no exaggeration to compare her colouring—as cannot often be done—with the splendours of all the gardens of heaven and earth. With her proud bearing and the expression of sorrow on her face, she looked like a princess compelled by misfortune to escape in the garb of a poor woman.

They made her sit down at the table, and opposite, one beside the other, huddled up, sat the two sisters, very close together, as though they wished, by the nearness of their bodies, to recover the warmth that had been withdrawn from them by a chilling state of mind, and to give each other physical protection. They did not know how to start a conversation which—it was immediately obvious—could not be opened by the young woman herself. It was quite impossible to imagine what word might issue forth from that exquisitely beautiful mouth over which ran an almost feverish tremor.

But it was indeed she who began, without uttering a syllable. Bending her head even lower, until her chin touched her chest, instinctively hiding her face, not having the courage to hide it with her hands, she started weeping in a composed fashion, making an effort to smother the sound she made, showing that she could no longer manage to restrain the tears she had held back until that moment.

“It really is true, then?”

Giving way to even more violent weeping, and lowering her brow even farther, the girl answered without speaking; her silence was a confession.

Teresa scratched her head at the point where her hair began, round and round and round; and this brought her back to the reality that she had to face. And Carolina clung closely to her side, grasping her arm tightly, like a frightened child clinging close to its mother.

“Bad . . . bad . . . yes, indeed . . . bad, yes, very bad . . .” Really, Teresa did not know what to say, for there was a clash of the most diverse feelings in her mind; and since there was a tightness in her throat, these feelings produced a confusion from which issued only stupid, broken words, without logic and without any efficacy in relation to the obvious gravity of the situation.

“Extremely bad . . . extremely bad . . .”

And Carolina, seeing someone else weeping, was hard put to it not to weep herself.

“After all, we’re girls ourselves . . .” The fact that this beginning did not produce even the faintest gleam of hilarity was a clear proof of the solemn nature of the occasion. “We’re girls ourselves, and *we*’ve been young too, and no one can say anything against *our* behaviour—you can ask anyone you like—nothing whatsoever, absolutely nothing; nobody can say anything, you can ask as much as you like. . . .”

Her assertions were, in point of fact, mere subterfuges, meaningless, proffered simply in order to say something, providing the noise necessary to avoid a silence both dangerous and intolerable.

“*We*’ve never been found with child, never. . . .”

These words, which seemed to be uttered unwillingly, had the effect, once they were out—though spoken inopportunistly, as always happens on such occasions—of restoring contact with reality.

“Now the fat’s in the fire. . . . And what a mix-up! Things have got to be straightened out. Straightened out . . . that is to say . . . well, that’s just a manner of speaking; straightened out

... how? I'm asking you . . . come on and tell me—how? *You* tell me, if you can, what's to be done? *You* must say, because *I* haven't the least idea of what ought to be done."

The growing acidity in her voice tended to give substance to the disconnected words.

"People who do that must take the consequences. Fine consequences, too, for a bit of fun! And how long is it you've been carrying on?"

Whether it was that she was unable, or that she judged it better in her own interest, the girl made no sort of reply to Teresa's stream of admonitions.

"Going with a young man who has no position in the world . . . Yet you ought to know how things are, you're over eighteen, you're not a child any more . . . You ought to know . . . See where you've landed yourself! . . . People who do that must take the consequences."

Having come to a full stop, she seemed anxious to barricade herself behind this not very Christian maxim.

"That's how it is, you see? So there you are. We'll send for you if there's any need. I don't know anything about it"—she raised her voice imperiously—"I haven't heard anything, I don't want to know anything. Certain things I don't *want* to know about."

For the moment the girl's only apparent desire was to betray no sign of reaction and to submit as much as she was required to submit.

She had been with them for some months in order to learn embroidery—in fact, she had been their first assistant at the time when they had decided to admit helpers; and she was the most vigorous and beautiful young woman in the neighbourhood and already famous for her beauty in all the countryside; she now did a certain amount of work independently, in her own home. She was the daughter of a market-gardener, a poor man who rented a small piece of land on the Settignano road, where he grew vegetables and also flowers and had put up some small, primitive greenhouses; they were very poor people who worked

very hard in a hundred ways in order to gain a living. During the summer Remo often stopped there in the morning, in front of the big gate where the girl lived; and at the sound of the horn, three times repeated, either her father or brother would come out, but more often the girl herself. Palle would say with a laugh: "Flower"; for he, born and brought up in the open country where flowers are the most familiar of objects, did not know their names and called them simply "flowers," or called them all "roses"—just as he called every kind of ornament worn by women "pearls," whether they were really pearls or precious stones or pieces of glass or china, and of whatever type or colour. "Flower," Palle would say, and the gardener or the girl would bring Remo a gardenia, which he would fix in his buttonhole and then quickly replace his hands on the steering wheel. This was the only visible contact that Remo had with the family; there had been no reason to suspect what had been happening. None of the neighbours had ever noticed that there was any understanding between the pair, that they were having a love affair: no one had ever surprised them together. And the neighbourhood did not usually allow certain dainty morsels to go unregarded, being inordinately gluttonous of such things. Furthermore, during the period when the girl was coming to work with the aunts, Remo had shown complete lack of interest in her—which had not escaped the notice of the two women, but had pleased them to an extraordinary degree. They had attributed it to the exceptional virtue of their nephew (considering the provoking beauty of their pupil) and to the respect he felt towards himself and his home, and, above all, towards his aunts. Here were civic virtues that might be held up as a universal example. But there is another custom I must mention to you in relation to this apparently spontaneous and simple question, even though it will bring you down to earth; and that is that, whereas people who live in towns long for the country with all their souls and seek to go there as often as possible, to take their fill of poetry, going out in columns, in swarms, in bands, in troops, but more especially in pairs, to roam amongst

the pleasant groves, along the streams, to the top of some inspiring peak, or in enticing, intimate hollows, the countryfolk, on the other hand, being saturated with poetry and having so many attractions right in front of their doors, which they can enjoy *ad nauseam*, go, when they want to give vent to their poetic feelings, inside the walls of the town, go, all of them, to some hiding place right in the middle of it, when they want to make love.

When Remo came home, he was called into the dining room and made to sit down in the very same place where the girl had been sitting, at the table which had now become the bar of a tribunal.

And in their same place, but now in a more self-confident attitude, sat the aunts, ready to launch the attack in no uncertain manner.

Although it was quite unexpected, Remo at once understood what the subject of the intended discourse was going to be; but he still held his head admirably high.

“Laurina has been here,” said Teresa in a hard, frank tone of voice, her face drawn, and assuming an expression of cruelty—an expression that she knew well how to assume when there was a woman in the case but which, as a matter of fact, had been quite lacking from her face in the girl’s presence.

“Well?” answered Remo, to cut short the preliminaries of the trial.

“You know what she says?”

“Yes, I know; or rather I don’t know, but I can imagine.”

“Is it true?”

“Yes.” He uttered the single syllable with assurance, putting into it all his male responsibility.

At this “Yes,” at this firm reply, Teresa seemed turned to ice. The curious thing was that, just a few days before, poor Laurina, too, had been turned to ice, when, having said to him amidst her sobs: “I’m going to have a baby,” the answer had come back: “And I’m not.” That was all he had said. The tears had been

checked on her eyelashes, and her face had become just like that of Teresa.

"And what do you intend to do?" pursued Teresa with a threatening sound in her voice.

"What any young man of honour would do in my place," said Remo with the solemn simplicity of supreme resolve.

They very nearly asked him what that duty was. Did they not know? Had they forgotten? Or did they not wish to believe it? But they stopped themselves in time and went on to reply, somewhat tardily, in a vague, bewildered manner:

"Yes, of course."

"Yes, of course."

"Certainly."

"Naturally."

"He's a young man of honour," Carolina thought, though what she really meant was: "There's nothing to be done." Teresa seemed to be driving her head against this rock of rectitude.

They went on turning over and over in their mouths this phrase which would not penetrate into their minds and which yet had to be remembered—like children learning a task with great difficulty: "What any young man of honour would do in my place." "He's a young man of honour," thought Carolina; "there's nothing to be done." And there was Teresa with her head still butting against that rock of rectitude.

It must be pointed out that Remo had put a good dose of sincerity into what he had said: he was, in truth, a gambler with regard to life, and an extremely clever one; and he felt sure that, however they arranged the pieces on the board for him, he had the skill to win.

"Of course, of course."

"Certainly."

"Naturally."

Next day Giselda had another extremely long list of commissions to be done in Florence.

It was arranged that the parish priest of Santa Maria should

come and see the Materassis. He was very young—not more than twenty-five—fair, with light-coloured eyes, and with that sort of spiritual gentleness and docility that can, in the cause of duty, become stiff and inflexible. Two ladies, in a villa nearby, had had the following conversation about him. “He’s a missionary, a born missionary, that young man!” one of them had exclaimed on seeing him for the first time; and the other, who was also seeing him for the first time, had answered in an imploring tone: “He’s so charming—why?”

Remo knew him well, and when he came upon him, in the morning, waiting in the road for the tram, would ask him to get into the car and offer to take him anywhere he wished. The two young men, the ascetic and the worldly one, would sit side by side, talking in a friendly way; there was a mutual liking between them, a desire for cordiality—even, it might have been thought, for mutual understanding; in spite of the spiritual distance between them they managed to achieve contact, to remain in each other’s company without irritation, without discomfort on either side, as though they were two pilgrims who could reach the same goal by entirely different roads. Palle, catching sight of him in the distance, would say: “The priest.” As all flowers were roses and all jewels pearls, so all priests, from the humblest curate to the Pope, were the same to him. And Remo would say: “Come on, come on, Father, come and get in,” welcoming him affectionately into the car. “Where are you going? Where can I take you?”

The most important, and at the same time the most difficult, thing was to prevent the affair becoming known to a living soul; for once scandal broke out, all discussion became useless.

Having heard Teresa’s story, the young priest was unable to restrain an ingenuous smile which demonstrated both the profound purity of his own heart and the simplicity of the solution. He sat thinking for a little, causing the two women to hang upon his lips but at the same time giving them to understand that his delay was due to ordinary good manners, owing to the particular delicacy of the subject, and could have no possible influence on

his reply; then recalling, with serene satisfaction, their nephew's own noble response, he concluded by saying that that was the true, the only course to be taken. And he showed himself to be readily disposed to speak to the young people separately.

The Materassis, who had accompanied his discourse with interjections such as "Of course," "Indeed," "Yes, that's true, certainly he's a young man of honour," concealing a disappointment that they were anxious, above all, to conceal from themselves, both lost patience when the priest offered to speak to the young people—"Not so fast, not so fast, don't say anything yet"—and they insisted, for the moment, on the greatest possible reserve over this thorny question, the greatest possible secrecy. "There's plenty of time, no hurry to say anything yet."

"If you knew . . . if you only knew, Father, this is the last thing we wanted to happen, this is the end of everything. . . ."

But the priest knew everything and understood everything and remained smiling and inflexible, while the two women kept on asking and wondering "Why?"—a question to which no one knew the answer, which not even they themselves dared to answer.

And Niobe, who found nothing to laugh at in a matter so very simple and natural, which she knew all about from personal experience, and which was so easily reparable, echoed: "Why?"

The following day the doctor was summoned.

As for Giselda, she no longer lived at Santa Maria but at Florence. She had no luck, poor Giselda, for now would have been the time for her to go through her whole repertoire, since she could smell something of great importance behind all these visits, and they sent her to Florence to fetch the most ridiculous things.

The doctor was a plump, cheerful man of a little over fifty, peace-loving by nature; the only thing that disturbed his tranquillity was the pigheadedness of the peasants, which sent him into rages whose violence served at least to work them off rapidly; and as soon as he had worked them off he became immediately serene again, and cheerful and happy. That was the moment

when he would easily have allowed his heart to be stolen. With all his serenity and good nature, he performed his duty to the point of complete forgetfulness both of himself and of his own interests.

As soon as he was told of the affair he began to laugh heartily, his big, round, pink face lighting up at the thought of the girl, whom he knew well. Handsome girls, it was easy to see, still exercised a great fascination upon his exuberant middle age. He knew Remo, and knew also that the aunts were well off and devoted to him, and he could see nothing more natural than that the pair should make amends by marriage for this sin which they had committed in anticipation of it—and which made him smile and filled his heart with fatherly tenderness.

“They’re poor people, as you know, very poor indeed, and thankful if they make enough to live upon. . . . She’s a girl who hasn’t a chemise to her back, as you might say. . . .”

“But you can make her one, you make so many. . . .”

“She came here for two or three months to learn embroidery, and now she does a little on her own, but of course . . . she needs more than that, she hasn’t any real capacity. . . . Just trifles, enough to buy herself a little dress or a pair of shoes . . . Remo has no position—for the moment he’s not doing anything—he goes in for motorcars. . . .”

“But you’re rich.”

“Not so rich as people think,” retorted Teresa, annoyed.

“Well, anyhow, you’re comfortably off.”

“Not so much as people say,” she insisted, more and more annoyed at this reputation of wealth which was now putting her at a disadvantage. “We’ve had such enormous expenses recently, such enormous expenses—if you only knew, Doctor—and such blows, if you knew. . . . We’ve had to meet so many demands. . . . This young man has cost us a great deal, a great deal—you understand?”

Carolina, who kept her head bowed and her eyes closed to let it be understood that she was in full approval, that all her sister

said was gospel truth, indeed sacred, now began to give great nods of assent, still without opening her eyes, to prove that the words were doubly sacred and for that reason must be given their full weight.

“We don’t make as much as we used to; people are losing their taste for fine things, for beautiful things; for some time now, I don’t know why, they’re quite content to spend only a little; and we’re not children any more, our strength gets less every day, we can’t work as we once did, we need rest, we’re tired. . . .”

It was not clear why Teresa should be giving vent to this flow of confidences which bore no relation to the main point of the question, as though she wanted to push it aside, or skirt round it, or evade it for some mysterious reason of her own, and then come back to it to find a changed spirit on the part of the doctor: and her tone of voice was so convincing that you could not but be sorry for her.

The doctor went on nodding his head in acknowledgment of all he was being told, none of which altered his opinion in the smallest degree. The girl, even though poor, was a good, honest girl and very beautiful into the bargain, and Remo, with a readiness that was praiseworthy, was undertaking to marry her. On this point the aunts kept their mouths hermetically sealed, not daring to maintain the contrary, but reserving their judgment: she had been, in any case, altogether too yielding to the assaults of the male.

“You see, my dear Doctor, we too are girls, and we too have been young like the others, and there were men in our time too, and they did what they wanted to do, just as they do today, if they were allowed to . . . and yet . . . no one can say anything against us; to us, certain things could not have happened.”

“Man is a hunter,” put in Carolina, raising her head and opening her eyes wide, in a heroic manner; it was the first time she had made her voice heard.

The doctor, contemplating her, started laughing again. “And very often he hunts two-legged hares.”

It was obvious that the comic aspect of the situation was very much to his taste.

"Honour . . . honour . . ." repeated Teresa. "I know Remo is a young man of honour; I am the first to praise him for that, and it gives me great pleasure that it should be so—indeed, I should be sorry if it were otherwise; but even this blessed honour is a thing that can be carried too far."

Having reached this stage, the sisters had no wish to demand an explicit declaration from the doctor, whom they thanked gratefully after having offered him something to drink; so that things were left in the air, with a tacit understanding, concealed, in the last part of the conversation, under a number of interjections: "Of course . . . Yes . . . We'll see, certainly, naturally," punctuated by sighs. And they continued, on their own account, to procrastinate, to reconnoitre, to take time for reconnoitring.

What was it they were looking for? For they appeared to be looking for something, while they listened to the various opinions on the subject in the way that the president of a tribunal listens to witnesses during a trial. And what was Niobe looking for? Yes, Niobe, too, was searching, still searching; she did not, like the priest and the doctor, publish any opinion, but she kept on reconnoitring, like her mistresses—in fact, even more than they. And when they told her that Remo was to marry Laurina—which they did in order to arouse her uncertainty, in order to assure themselves of it more thoroughly—Niobe listened in an absent-minded way and answered: "Oh yes, of course, yes, yes," with her mind far, far away.

Teresa formed an extreme resolution—which must have cost her no inconsiderable effort—to question Giselda. How could such an idea come into her head? To make her sister a party to the family secret, to ask her advice? But she, after all, knew from experience what marriages were like that started under an unlucky star; she could give an opinion worthy of attention, far better than the parish priest and the doctor.

And so, after all those long and repeated trips to Florence,

Giselda, too, took her seat at that same dining-room table opposite her two sisters, who spoke to her with all the secrecy of the confessional.

As she listened to what had happened, her eyes gradually lit up with an evil, bitter pleasure: she was profoundly delighted that an irreparable thing of this kind should have occurred in the house, that Remo should have put a young woman in the family way. And since she was wholly convinced that a marriage begun under these auspices could never be a happy one, and that the girl would perhaps be even more unfortunate than she herself had been—anything would be better for her than a forced marriage with a young man of that kind—she began by asking:

“And Remo—what does he think about it?”

“Remo, as you know, is a young man of honour—perhaps even a little too much so, in this case, but we can’t find fault with him for that, it’s quite right that it should be so—Remo said at once that his duty was clear: to marry her, and to marry her in the shortest possible time.”

“Ah! . . . To marry her?”

“In the shortest possible time,” repeated Teresa tartly.

“Yes, I see, I see . . .” Giselda was bewildered by this piece of news, and she hesitated, like a wayfarer at a crossroads, before starting out along one of them, so as not to take the wrong turning.

“Ah! To marry her . . . yes, I see, I see,” she repeated, trying to get her bearings, “and in the shortest possible time.”

“You understand, of course, that a young man of honour *has* to speak like that; but it’s up to us to make the final decision. After all, he’s no more than a boy, he’s incautious, and he has no experience of life; he let himself be caught by good looks; that was what happened, he was led on by passion; and it’s we who have to place the responsibility where it ought to be.”

“Yes, yes, indeed . . .” Giselda felt that the fate of a victim depended upon what she said, but, reading clearly the expecta-

tion of her verdict in the eyes of her sisters, she felt at the same time that this was the moment to avenge herself both upon Remo and upon them, and assumed a pose of the greatest dignity.

"He must marry her, good heavens, of course he must! The one who has done the harm must put it right. . . . He must marry her, and in the shortest possible time, there's not a minute to lose: how many months is it?"

"Two, apparently."

"There's no time to lose."

They neither spoke nor breathed, the two sisters; they felt that she was lying from the bottom of her heart simply in order to spite them, and when she had gone away, tight-lipped and hard, Carolina said angrily:

"It would have been better if we had never told her."

"She won't speak, you can be sure of that; she won't dare to speak."

They were the only ones, now, who had not given their verdict, and they still withheld it after everyone else had expressed an identical opinion. The only thing left to be done was to make preparations, without any delay, for the wedding of Remo and the gardener's daughter, for whom they themselves would have to make underclothes so that she could get married, seeing that her family was not in a position to provide them. Teresa wandered around in a state of anxiety and suffering, like someone who can fight no more and is on the point of surrendering.

"She knew exactly the way to catch him," said Carolina, disconsolate and full of resentment, "shameless hussy!" She seemed to be dreaming. And her sister raised her head as though summoning up the last scrap of energy from the depths of her being.

"We'll see who wins," she declared, frowning in a menacing manner.

As for Remo, after that noble answer he had made to his aunts, all we have been able to gather from him on the subject is one sentence which he let fall to Palle (but which was really addressed to himself) as they were driving towards Florence:

"Well, well, my dear Palle . . . there aren't only *old* women in this world—my goodness, no!"

Palle looked at him and laughed in his quick, sudden way: did *he* know, too, that there are not only old women in this world? To look at him, you would think that he knew it to perfection, that he had known it before he was born; and yet, on the contrary, he did not even know this elementary truth.

"However . . . however," added Remo, still speaking to himself, and pressing on the accelerator, "it must be admitted that even the old ones do their part quite well."

That was all he said, and Palle laughed again, in an even more knowing manner; but it was not he, of course, who was the knowing one.

The Materassis were silent, pensive, gloomy; and sometimes they lost courage, exhausted by the tension of their one, dominating thought. Sometimes there were certain moments of relief when they seemed to be awaiting supernatural intervention.

There was no time to be lost; every day increased the gravity of the situation. It might be that interference on the part of the girl's family was imminent; in the distress of waiting she might confess everything to her mother or father; she had elder brothers who might call the guilty party to account. With all these ideas in their heads, the poor women's anxiety became a passion, an agony. Niobe, too, was gloomy, reserved, unsmiling; she was seen to appear and disappear mysteriously, and she seemed always on the point of saying something and then went away again without saying anything. Her mistresses took good care not to question her, wherever she went or wherever she came from; they were quite unable to divine her movements, which previously had always been as clear as those of the sun, and they were unwilling to invent explanations or make guesses. She looked down on the ground as if searching for something that it was extremely painful to have lost; even she, always so courageous, had now lost heart; she was a different woman.

When she raised her head again, having recovered her usual

lively expression, the neighbours saw her in the street in a silk dress (not her own, of course), carefully washed and combed, waiting for the tram with a suitcase in her hand.

Where was Niobe off to?

“Good-bye, see you again soon!” she answered those who ran up to speak to her.

“Good-bye, see you soon! I’ll be back in two or three days. I’m going home, I’m going to the grape harvest.”

And her mistresses, too, stood at the gate to see her off and say good-bye to her. “She’s off to the grape harvest,” they repeated, making every possible effort to laugh and be gay. “She’s going home, she’s off to the grape harvest.” And they watched her go, just as if they had known precisely, from *a* to *z*, what the reasons of her journey were, whereas they knew no more than the others, and acted as if she really were going to the grape harvest.

“Good-bye! See you soon! Good-bye!”

The moment she had said “I’m going” and had asked for a dress, the sisters had rushed to the cupboard without asking where she was going or why, so great were the confidence and hope that they placed in her: they understood everything without a word. And so it was that, when they said with the others, “She’s off to the grape harvest,” and made every effort to laugh, they knew just as much as the others did, and did not know, really, why they were laughing; they knew in themselves, on the other hand, that they had not the slightest desire to laugh, even while they went on doing so. And the neighbours, accustomed by now to plenty of odd things that had for some time been happening in the family, went on saying that Niobe had gone off to the grape harvest, as though it were a habit of hers, a thing that happened every year at that season—whereas, in thirty years, she had never said that she had a home and had never gone away for one single day.

There followed seven days of strain, of leaden silences, of discouragement, and of unexpressed hope, shot through, nevertheless, by a thin thread of light.

When she reappeared at Santa Maria, getting off the tram one evening at dusk, she was bursting with something or other that was trying to escape through her eyes, her mouth, her whole person, but that she was forced to keep to herself. And to all those who ran to meet her and swarmed round her, since she could not give anything of what she had inside her—a treasure of a different kind of fruit, certainly—she gave what she had *outside*: for she was laden with grapes like a bacchante, with branches and sprays and clusters, in the midst of which was her laughing, toothless mouth. She allowed herself to be plucked and divested of her leaves and fruit, herself wildly gesticulating in order to give each person something, a cluster or several clusters joined together—grapes of the finest quality, sweet and juicy, grapes from the hills, not like those of Santa Maria, acid and nothing but skin. Such was the rejoicing that the triumph of the hills was complete.

A few days later the news spread with the greatest rapidity: Laurina was to be a bride. She was marrying a young man from “up above.” The inhabitants of the immediate environs, of the first row of hills round the town, in their privileged position in the great amphitheatre, use the expression “up above” to indicate those others who live up at the back, at the top, much higher up, as it were in the circles and the gallery. And they say “up above” with a faint feeling of contempt, just like the ladies in the best seats when they allude to the crowds perched near the ceiling, and they wrinkle up their little noses (just like them) all the more, the more “up above” you have to go, where the inhabitants wear heavy boots but have subtle brains. The young man was by no means ugly, was robust and apparently good-natured, and not too coarse by origin. He was the son of a gardener who lived at a villa far up in the hills—a villa which was already beginning to take on the aspect of a fairy castle. The marriage had to be celebrated in a great hurry because the young man in question had taken over a flower shop right in the centre of Florence, and it

was essential that he should have his wife's help in starting on his new work.

It was a lavish and extremely cheerful wedding, at which the whole of Santa Maria was present, except, of course, the Materassis, Remo, and Niobe. But the Materassis were now considered to be of a class too exalted to take part in plebeian weddings: they were the aristocracy of the village. And as for Niobe—why, it was well known, she never left the house, for any reason. Nobody remembered that, two months before, she had deserted it for seven whole days in order to go to the grape harvest.

A close understanding was established between the servant and her mistresses, who, at that very moment, had to sign a certain paper—an initial mortgage of fifty thousand lire on their house property. But they were happy and triumphant at the battle they had won.

It seems that Laurina, one evening a few days before she got married, stopped Remo on the road, to have a last explanation with him; but of the very brief dialogue which took place between the pair, we know only the last few words, which a gust of wind happened to blow in our direction:

“Will you come sometimes and get your gardenia from me?”

Without noticing, he answered exactly as he had answered the sporting countess when she asked him whether he had found women who gave everything for nothing:

“Well . . . I wonder . . . perhaps.”

“Giselda! Niobe!”

JUST like his grandfather, just exactly like!” The old men, recalling the weakness of the father towards the son, said: “Poor old man, he had no sense where he was concerned, he would have died for him. What an unfortunate family! Nothing but bad luck. Poor Materassis!” And the ill-natured ones added, when they saw them getting into the car to go and dine in Florence: “What airs they put on!”—or, when they went off for expeditions to fashionable holiday resorts: “*They* like the gay life, too, it seems. Of course, as we know, everybody likes what’s good. Just like their father. He’s passed on his brain to them. They’ve given themselves up to pleasure. They’ve lost their heads.”

Everyone knew the critical state of affairs in which they had been struggling for some time, and had full information on the subject of the new mortgages on the house property. “There’s a curse on those houses, they slip through people’s fingers, there’s no keeping them.” This knowledge that they were no longer the absolute owners of the place resulted in a decay of respect towards them and of their previous authority. Their tenants took to treating them without special consideration, while they themselves redoubled their haughtiness. But when Remo arrived or departed with the faithful Palle, people stood openmouthed with admira-

tion: names of film stars rose to the lips of the girls—Rudolph Valentino, Charles Farrell, Ramon Novarro, or Gary Cooper . . . And it was only when they had gone off in triumph that the remarks started again: "It's always carnival time in that house. . . . But they're going just a bit too far. It'll soon be Lent, you mark my words. . . ." What they could not bear, above all, was that Palle should have had this stroke of luck, since he too was permitted to enjoy all this high living, although he had no right to it whatsoever. "He's fallen on his feet all right. . . . Heaven send us good luck too," they ended up sententiously. And while the visits of clients grew rarer and rarer, those of creditors increased daily, for, since they were unable to catch Remo in the town, they came to look for him at home, at Santa Maria, where they were received by the aunts and put off with payments on account or promises.

The scene which I am about to describe to you occurred one day just after they had finished their midday meal.

As always in all families, this is the time of day when quarrels and disputes blaze forth and rage furiously, when ill-humour and bitterness, rivalries and jealousies, are let loose: domestic troubles form the last course at table. No one would think of starting such a performance before the soup, or if, by pure chance, it was started and had not gone too far, the appearance of the smoking tureen would suffice to interrupt it by producing the silence due to a sacred rite. But when the body has been satisfied, when it has been filled to the best of its ability, that is the moment when the spirit seems anxious to discard its worst part, its ballast. How blessed it is to be able to exchange insults after eating and drinking well, on a full stomach, when there is nothing else requiring to be done; to fling a few reproaches in each other's faces, to lay bare each other's faults and vanities and weaknesses—both to lay bare those of others and to feel one's own being laid bare in turn; to have a ruthless trial of strength, to be overbearing, to assert oneself in some way or other, to make others feel one's weight. When the family is united and in good fettle, this is the best moment.

Giselda had left the room. Giselda, by this time, could smell a storm in the air with the acutest perception, just as pigs can scent truffles underground. It gave her pleasure to disappear and leave the field clear for action, so as not to spoil or disturb the natural development of the storm by her presence. She liked to leave her sisters at grips with their nephew—and, for that matter, with the servant too—and all she herself did, if she felt like it, was to give utterance, from the first floor, to some little ditty of a sentimental, pathetic, or nostalgic nature—or even, if she judged it suitable, heroic, or comic—just at the moment when the people underneath were in the least congenial frame of mind for enjoying solo singing. The most critical moments in the family fortunes, therefore, took place to the accompaniment of music, like those in a melodrama.

Palle, also, had gone away. He too was able to sense the exact moment to sneak away, to run off to the garage and clean the car or get it ready.

Every time there had been fights and arguments and heated scenes, Remo had maintained a serene and smiling air which reflected his own profound feeling of coldness and indifference, whatever the cause or the result might be; he never defended what he had done and was never insistent in order to attain his ends; he would attain them, in fact, by withdrawing. His expression, on this occasion, was gloomy and frowning, hard, openly self-willed. For the first time there was a vertical furrow between his eyebrows, doing violence to the adolescent purity which still lingered in the face of the adult man. You could feel, even before he opened his mouth, that he had determined to have his own way at the cost of harshness, of violence, of cruelty.

Mention was made of a certain debt which had to be paid, of considerable magnitude, and on account of which persistent pressure was being applied; it had to be added, therefore, to the many others—always on the increase—which had to be faced. Remo was visibly annoyed, as though he felt, all at once, the weight on his shoulders of a state of affairs that had become intolerable.

"We must make an end, once and for all, of these people who come asking for money."

Determined to stand up to him energetically, Teresa fixed him with her eye. "They come to ask for what they have a right to," she began calmly, masking her own reserves; then, stiffening a little: "What must be made an end of is spending money out of all proportion to what exists; what must be made an end of is running up debts that we cannot pay."

Her nephew examined her closely, calculating her resistance in relation to her intentions.

"And the debts that already exist?" he let slip with a coolness that was half childish and half cunning.

"Those that exist must be paid off gradually; otherwise everybody will expect to be paid at once."

"No."

"What d'you mean—no?"

"They must all be paid together, there's nothing else to be done"—he pronounced the syllables clearly and resolutely—"all together."

Teresa laughed bitterly.

"All together?" She pretended, at first, not to understand. "Ah! All together, I see—and what with?"

"There's got to be an end of all this story about debts; it's gone on too long, I don't want to hear any more about it."

Teresa looked at him with an irony which concealed anger.

"Ah! Of course . . . yes . . . it's gone on too long, that's exactly what I meant, yes, it's gone on too long; yes, I know, I know, too, that it's gone on too long, indeed it has. . . ."

She looked at him with a bitter, menacing, malicious expression.

"All together . . . and with what? Don't you know that we haven't a penny left, that we've nothing but debts and the mortgaged houses?"

"That's exactly why they must be paid all together."

"With what?" she cried furiously.

"With a promissory note," replied her nephew calmly.

"A promissory note?"

She felt deeply wounded and troubled at this terrible phrase which had not been uttered for forty years under that roof, which had so sadly haunted her early youth, and which she had thought to be banished forever—the promissory note. The promissory note to be paid: the dismal feeling in the house beneath the threat of it, her mother's eyes red with weeping. How many times, when she was a child, had that gloomy phrase hung over the house! Her father ill, the promissory note to be met. Her mother would wipe her eyes and dress herself and go to Florence, after going round the village from door to door, and would call on friends and acquaintances in an attempt to escape the serving of the writ, the visit of the bailiffs, the pawning of her belongings. And sometimes, when she had failed to scrape together the money in time, the writ had been served, to the anguish and helpless misery of the entire family, the mother and her poor daughters; while the father had hurled imprecations and blasphemies from his invalid chair. It was from that misery that the girls had derived so much force in their own lives. And now the ghosts of her childhood were showing their faces again—mortgages, promissory notes, protests, the pawnshop, creditors, bailiffs; they were all reappearing, at the doors, at the windows, coming back into the house, taking shape again, by some inexorable fatality.

"During all the forty years that I've been working at my profession I've never signed a promissory note," she concluded with desperate determination, entrenching herself in this assertion as if on the edge of an abyss. "I do *not* sign promissory notes."

"But it's the only way, it's the best possible way left to us at this difficult moment; and afterwards we shall feel relieved and be able to breathe. All this business of debts will be finished. . . . We shan't run up any more. I shall get my job at last. . . ."

He spoke calmly, so as to make an impression of unswerving resolution.

Teresa's attention was struck, not so much by her nephew's

mention of the impending but hypothetical job which was due to appear any day but always failed to materialize (her confidence in it was already irreparably shaken), as by these words: "We shan't run up any more." He considered these debts, therefore, as being incurred in common; he laid a part of the blame, of the responsibility, on the aunts, and they were responsible, with him, for their own ruin: all this he was asserting with impunity; and there was, in his lack of explicitness, a veiled accusation which he intended now to insinuate, to suggest, and which he would later proclaim openly, with no lack of explicitness at all.

Even amid the agitation caused in her by this revealing remark, Teresa still maintained the strength of her determination.

"Never, never, never; with me it's a question of principle. I'd rather have my head sawn off than sign a promissory note."

Carolina, during this scene, had been gazing at Remo, feeling that her sister's resistance was a merely transitory matter, and calculating in how short or how long a time her surrender would follow. At one moment she gazed at him imploringly, then she would make grimaces with her mouth which seemed to threaten a shower of ferocious insults; then again her face would wear a look of avidity that suggested an imminent attack with tooth and nail; and then she would fall back into her attitude of supplication.

At this precise moment Remo took from his pocket a small rectangular piece of paper—the note to be signed. And, as it made its appearance in the young man's hands, so, in the doorway, appeared Niobe, coming to a halt there with hands on hips, as though to meditate upon what was taking place, at its culminating point. Nor was it easy to tell whether her intervention would tend to favour the nephew or help to reinforce the strenuous resistance of the aunts.

The whole affair was beginning to assume the solemn, and at the same time automatic, quality of a scene on the stage, instead of remaining a scene of rough, simple life upon which the happiness and the actual existence of a family depended.

"I'm signing nothing!" shouted Teresa, jumping to her feet and speaking louder and louder, barring the way to that small piece of paper that should have passed from Remo's hands into her own. "I'm signing nothing!" she repeated, bringing down her fist heavily on the table and drawing herself up even more stiffly in order to stress the force of her words, the immutability of her decision. "We shall pay what we think fit, when and how we can—that is to be understood; we are under no obligation to do it, and, as regards the future, we shall put a disclaimer in the papers. We have spent all we had, we've mortgaged the houses and the farm, and we're not disposed to reduce ourselves to beggary for your sake; that would be a mortal sin which no one would forgive us."

She moved away, as if to leave the room.

Carolina, who had never taken her eyes off her nephew, rose to her feet, still gazing at him, and, as though to pour out over him all that was in her heart, both for and against him, hurled herself upon him, clasping his body tightly, squeezing it with all her strength, and bursting into tears.

Remo did not turn a hair; he allowed himself to be squeezed. He had no fear of the violent method as used by women, nor of the weak one either, feeling himself to have a complete mastery of exactly the right measures to be taken in both cases, being impermeable also to faintings and tears. So he let himself be squeezed, he let himself be embraced. And Carolina squeezed him with the strength of desperation. She scratched him, and he allowed himself to be scratched. And when she pulled his head down towards hers and sought his mouth, he surrendered it to her in just the same way as he had ten years before, in the train, and during the first days after his arrival at Santa Maria. The mouth of the adult man was surrendered again with the same coldness as the mouth of the adolescent, violently exciting and confusing her. And instead of letting him go, she clung to him, in a profound bewilderment of her whole being, more tightly than ever.

“Get away! Get away!” shrieked Teresa, assailed by a turmoil of feminine fury. “Get away! Get away!”—and she tore her sister away from the young man. “Get away!” she shrieked, she screamed, she croaked. Her voice had lost all humanity, and it was impossible to tell how much of practical energy there was in those cries of hers, and how much of that instinctive, obscure resentment—unconscious, one might say—that had made her stamp her feet in the train, while they were in the tunnel, when Carolina kissed the youthful Remo in front of the Romagna pig merchants. “Get away! Get away!”

She succeeded at last in tearing her away from him, pushing her violently towards the door, through which they went together, the one a prey to rage, the other to bewilderment. But Remo caught up with them. After submitting passively to Carolina’s rush of feeling, he had resumed his air of ruthlessness and shouted:

“You’ve got to sign it.”

The words were like the lash of a whip.

Teresa turned upon him with staring eyes, preparing to hurl herself at him and strike him, looking round for some object to throw at him. She felt a furious impulse to attack him—but not to embrace him, desperately, like her sister; her own desperation was active, so that the young man had, as it were, to split himself in two in order to meet the different feelings of the two women. But now Carolina was holding her sister, flourishing her arms in the air as she clung to Teresa’s hands to prevent her getting at him. Remo then drew himself up and pounced down upon them, reducing them to complete helplessness, showing that he answered violence with violence, just as he answered the impulses of the heart with an abandonment of all feeling. He seized them and held them together tightly in his arms so that they were unable to do anything, in a grip that left no possible doubt as to the power of his biceps, then pushed them out of the room right into the kitchen, while one of them all the time struggled to free herself in order to hit him and the other to hold her and prevent her

doing so; then he turned them round, while Niobe, joining the group, followed, ready and on the lookout to catch them, first on one side and then on the other, as though they were pieces of furniture that were being moved with difficulty and threatened to fall over. Nor was it possible to tell whether she meant to assist the efforts of the aunts to free themselves from the force that held them in bond and made them move against their own legitimate will, or those of the nephew to drive them where *he* wanted them to go. He pushed them along in this way to the space under the stairs which served as a store cupboard, opened the door, and thrust them forcibly into it.

When they realized what was happening, they ceased to struggle. There they were, shut up in this repulsive kennel; it had come to that. In one of them the impulse to strike, in the other the need to give way to her feelings fell and died away. There they were, imprisoned and left to die, perhaps, like the heroines of song and story, of melodrama and tragedy. In face of this monstrous fact they were deprived of all reason, frightened out of their wits. They allowed themselves to be shut up, and watched their nephew as, having turned on the electric light, he cleared a little space on top of the small table which was laden with pots and bottles and placed the promissory note there, with a fountain pen beside it. They looked on, astonished, at this performance, until their nephew, without opening his mouth or even glancing at them, went out again, closed the door, locked it, and put the key in his pocket.

Niobe, who had taken part in the commotion without any precise purpose in view, stayed close beside the door behind which her mistresses were imprisoned and from which there came no sign of life since they had heard the key turn in the lock.

What could they be doing inside the store cupboard?

The servant looked at the door in childish perplexity, and then back at Remo, trying to smile, hoping to receive a reassuring smile in reply, and to be enabled to guess what this game was—for to

have shut them up like that could only be a game. She had not lifted a finger to prevent it, had in no way exerted herself, in the certainty that all would turn out for the best; she, who could not bear that a hair of her mistresses' heads should be hurt, now that they were shut up in the cupboard felt overwhelmed by a kind of childish unhappiness. She had taken no active part in the scene because she thought that, if the debts had been incurred, scenes were of no great importance and did no good at all, the only remedy being to pay them—to sign the note. That was why she had remained a spectator. Her instinct told her not to put obstacles in the way of this domestic scene, which, given the circumstances, had to take place in this precise manner and which was not as tragic as it might appear. She was confirmed in her conviction by the fact that Remo, once he had thrust the two women into the cupboard and locked them in—with a hard expression on his face and a power in his arms that it was not easy either to escape or to resist—immediately became serene and calm and smiling again, that he had lit a cigarette and had started walking about the kitchen, stopping now and then with his hands in his pockets and his legs wide apart, swaying gently backwards and forwards as he stood in the doorway that looked out over the fields, gazing at the horizon and sending up graceful blue spirals of smoke.

“Just what I said,” repeated Niobe to herself in order to combat the growing disquiet she felt within her as she looked at the door behind which her two mistresses were imprisoned: “they’re like two children, you have to treat them like that, there’s nothing else to be done.” She looked at Remo, trying to smile but not succeeding, begging a smile from him that would restore her peace of mind by assuring her that it was all a joke. “They’re just silly women, that’s all; debts are debts, and when you make them, or let other people make them, of course you’ve got to pay them, goodness gracious me! You ought to think of that beforehand. They’re just like a couple of children.”

And Remo, wandering in a resigned fashion about the room,

seemed to be replying: "Yes, I know, I know, it was a ridiculous scene, childish, disgusting, repulsive, anything you like—but what is one to do? It's the only way you *can* treat some people. You've got to do all sorts of things in this world if you want to get on, if you want to live." Just as though all this tiresome business were an essential part of his profession which he sought to discharge in the best possible way, as though it were a thing he was doing to help others more than himself, and he were receiving merely the just compensation for a disagreeable task!

Niobe looked at him and, pointing at the cupboard door, began, with a great effort, winking at the young man so as to comfort herself in her own painful state of doubt. "They'll sign it, they'll sign it all right, of course they will; they're just like two children, they get a bit difficult, but one must be indulgent with them." She winked, she made signs, but she had no power to smile, she could not manage it; she tried to smile but could not open her lips; it was too painful, and the muscles would not obey her. And it is hard to describe the incongruous look of her serious face as she winked. "They'll sign, they'll sign," she thought; and then, after that, Remo would be careful how he spent money, he would settle down to sensible ways, he would really work, after having his fling while he was young, which was only natural. Her heart was overflowing with indulgence both for him and for the reckless appetite for life that young men have, for their irrepressible exuberances and errors and follies; she felt that all the best things in life were there and you had to know how to gather them in time. "You're only young once, my goodness gracious me, and after that it's nothing but memories." And privately she was sorry beyond words for her poor mistresses, who had nothing to remember, nothing but trouble and hard work.

But what were the two sisters doing inside that same cupboard where, ten years before, they had stood for half an hour one morning to get a sight of their nephew when, instead of using the stairs, he came down out of the window? Were they cowering behind the little window, as they did then to watch him descend?

This time, again, half an hour went by, and still no sound came from inside.

At last a whispering was heard, a rustling sound in the cupboard, a few broken words, and then weeping, weeping almost like that of a child. Carolina was weeping. Her weeping gradually exhausted itself, died away in faintly murmuring waves. And when it had stopped and silence reigned again, there came a tearful, supplicating voice that seemed to issue from underground: "Giselda! Gise—e—e—lda!"—with a long, long *e* that seemed to go on forever. From the first-floor window out of which she was looking Giselda began to sing:

*"A voice within my heart
Whispered to me;
Lindoro, by his art,
Hath stricken me.
Lindoro, I have sworn,
Mine shall he be . . ."*

"Giselda!" repeated the voice, more and more tearfully. But Giselda could not hear, intent as she was upon modulating her singing after the manner of a nightingale; and really she seemed like a nightingale in that rustic silence: how could she hear the younger sister's feeble appeal?

*"His guardian will refuse
But I my craft shall use
Until he doth agree.
Then shall I happy be . . ."*

"Giselda!" The appeal was repeated, but so faintly that it seemed doubtful whether the person who was calling really intended to be heard—and heard, especially, by someone who was singing at the top of her voice.

*"Docile am I, and courteous,
Obedient, soft and amorous,
Easy to rule or lead . . ."*

Was it that the hope of being heard was waning in Carolina's voice, or was it that fear was beginning to show through?

*"But touch me where my weakness is,
A viper I'll become . . ."*

A voice from within, equally mournful but louder, then made itself heard: "Niobe!"

Niobe, overjoyed at the sound, began to get agitated; her mistress was calling her and she must answer. She looked at Remo in fear and impatience, but he made a sign to her to the effect that he would hold her back if she moved, that he would bar her way if she tried to take action of any kind.

"Ni—i—iobe!" repeated a weak little voice, with an *i* so long and so thin that it seemed like a thread of glass.

And then the louder voice, in a tone which was still one of supplication but was meant to be one of command, repeated again: "Niobe!"

What ought she to do? Ought she to answer?

"I can't move," she replied, like someone who finds himself alive beneath the ruins after an earthquake, or immobilized in a house where burglars, before getting down to work, have bound and gagged everyone. "I can't open the door, I haven't got the key."

A long silence ensued, during which a certain tension became visible in Remo.

There was no more weeping, no sound at all, no tearful appeals.

Inside the store cupboard, it must be explained, there was no lack of all that is necessary to support life: there were air and light, and there was also the possibility of sitting down. There were wine and bread, there were eggs, ham, and sausage, there was fruit. Even in their present circumstances the nephew was indulging his aunts with honourable treatment.

In this way a second half hour went by. Remo went on walking up and down the kitchen and finished a large number of ciga-

lettes, one after another. His demeanour was tense and quiet, like that of a man engaged in the fulfilment of his duty.

Suddenly a noise was heard from inside the store cupboard, as it were a readjustment of positions, followed by two sharp, loud knocks—determined, almost arrogant—on the door. The young man sniffed the air for a moment, then swiftly and resolutely took the key from his trousers pocket, opened the door, and, having summed up the picture with a masterly eye, stood aside respectfully to allow his aunts to pass.

The two women, who were standing waiting behind the door, came out in single file. Teresa held her head high, answering supreme infamy with supreme disdain. She was a queen who has fallen into the hands of the mob, which prepares to execute her: she moved stiffly, as though no longer of this world, saturated with noble pride, on her lips a grimace of supreme disgust, unwilling to yield the least fraction of herself to the crowd that, materially, has taken possession of her. She walked forward in this way, holding in her hand the signed promissory note—sole, fragile bond that still joined her to earth—which seemed only just to touch her fingers, like a dry leaf clinging to a branch but ready to fall at the slightest movement of the air. Carolina, with bowed head and loosened hair, her arms hanging down as limply and tearfully as her tresses, her eyes red but no longer weeping since all their tears were shed—Carolina, on the other hand, was the Magdalene, ready to follow her Lord over the stones of Calvary to its very summit.

In the midst of all this anguish, Remo—it goes without saying—had already reassured himself with regard to the promissory note, which still bore, untouched, the figure he had written there, and at the bottom, in small writing: “Materassi Sisters.” He was about to take it from his aunt’s hand, but the little piece of paper fell, like the dead leaf from the bough, before those unworthy fingers could touch it. There was not even that contact between the nephew and the aunt: he had to stoop down and pick it up.

“There! . . . That’s fine . . . Oh! That’s splendid, now . . .

Excellent, perfect . . .” And with the haste of one who has extremely urgent affairs to attend to and not a moment to lose, he put the note into his pocketbook, looked at his wrist watch—“Splendid!”—without taking the slightest notice of the two women’s deeply tragic air, so very different from their ordinary demeanour—just as if it had been perfectly ordinary—and so far removed from his own hurried, practical manner.

“There, that’s fine; it’s just four o’clock, I haven’t a minute to lose. I’m going to run in to Florence—I’ve still half an hour. At five I’ll be back to fetch you—punctually at five, mind!” he repeated, very distinctly, so that there should be no confusion or misunderstanding: “punctually at five”—knowing that women are apt to keep one waiting. “We’ll go and have an *apéritif* at Narciso’s in the Cascine, then dinner at Fiesole, and then the Summer Follies; I’ve already taken a box.”

The women did not appear even to hear the invitation or the frivolous words accompanying it, which sounded positively offensive at that solemn moment; and, one behind the other, united in the feelings which I have already described, they resumed their mournful way, moving towards the staircase: then they went and shut themselves up in their room, as always at the supreme moments of their lives—after being released from prison.

“Five o’clock, on the dot,” cried their nephew again as he rushed off. “Good-bye, and don’t keep me waiting.”

Palle was ready at the gate with the car.

This time, however, not even Niobe could consider such an invitation to be opportune, and the insistence on this appointment at five o’clock irritated her. “Five o’clock, indeed! Dinner at Fiesole, indeed!” she pondered in her bewildered brain. “Narciso’s, indeed! Cascine, indeed! Summer Follies, indeed!” And she did not know that the poor creatures had signed a promissory note for a hundred thousand lire.

Not even Giselda, with all her bitterness, was capable of adding, on her own account, another drop of poison to her sisters’ cup: she maintained a dignified silence, judging her nephew’s audacity

to be beyond all limits. The invitation was even more offensive than it was futile—cynical, in fact. This time the young man had passed all bounds. The poor women would have to think about their own affairs, now that the abyss had swallowed them up with this final calamity: go to Fiesole, indeed! And the Cascine! *Apéritifs* and dinners! Summer Follies, indeed!

Niobe, in addition, was troubled at not having done all she could to avoid, at all costs, the highly distasteful scene of the imprisonment; she had made herself, by her passivity, into an accomplice of the nephew, and she regretted it with all her soul. Her heart had been pierced by the cries of her mistresses while they were shut up in the store cupboard: “Giselda! Niobe!” She had been just as cruel as their sister, far more cruel, in fact, since, in her quality of servant, she had betrayed them, she had sold them. Now that the young man was no longer there, she felt that her duty would have been to oppose his villainous plan with every possible means: she should have fought and struggled with him, she should have shouted and attracted people’s attention. Her surrender to him, to the fascination exercised by his presence, now seemed to her a guilty action, a downright guilty action towards her mistresses who had fallen into the power of a dissolute bully. She had been thrown into confusion without realizing it, without having time to assess what was happening, and now she was realizing it too late: she ought to have allowed her throat to be cut—and she felt she had all the courage needed for it, in face of this injustice, of this thing that she considered a disgrace—provided she could have prevented the signing of the note by this illicit, disgusting, violent method. And everything now told her: “Go on, go up to your mistresses, go and make your apologies, go and tell them how you failed to do your duty, how you stood idle at the moment when they needed you so badly, how you failed to take any action in face of blustering and overbearance on the part of a dissolute young man for his own unlawful ends. Go and join your heart with theirs, as you always have in moments of the greatest good and the greatest ill.” She had not

the courage for it. She felt guilty and contemptible. It was the first time she had ever lacked courage to face them with head held high. She despised herself and waited for them to call her, like a dog that dares not cross the threshold for fear of a blow, until a friendly voice, a kindly call, summons him: but this they did not even think of.

She started tidying up the kitchen, which was still in disorder from the midday meal; there was the washing up, all the crockery to be done. Between the discussions at first, and then the business of the store cupboard, it was now four o'clock, the coal in the stove had burned itself out to no purpose, the water in the big pot had gone off the boil some time ago. Every now and then she listened at the door, or tiptoed unsteadily to the bottom of the stairs, but her mistresses did not call her. Whatever state could they be in, poor dears? They gave no sign of life. Her heart was pierced ever more deeply by a sharp, sharp sword—that tearful voice from the cupboard that made her shudder: "Giselda! Niobe!" No one had stirred to help them. She had been disloyal, like that sister whom she detested for her disloyalty—worse than her. Into the washing-up basin the tears fell. "Giselda! Niobe!" She had acted like that infernal woman who had stood singing at her window while they were going through one of the most painful moments of their lives, an hour of agony, shut into that poky hole, victims of an abominable extortion. Giselda had not answered because of the hatred she bore towards everyone; and she herself had made a pretence of not being able to help them, she who would have died for her mistresses; and all because she had been far too fond of a scoundrel who hesitated at nothing for the sake of his own material gain. "Giselda! Niobe!" Who would give her the courage to go to them? How would she be able to meet their eyes? Big drops continued to fall. She stopped and began to wipe her hands on her apron, her eyes on her forearm; she went and listened at the door, then at the bottom of the stairs; but she had not the courage to go up, and came back and put her hands in the water again and went on with her job. Why didn't

they call her? And several times, as she wiped a bowl or a tumbler, she stopped suddenly and held her breath. . . . She thought she had heard a call: "Niobe!" But no. An illusion. The voice had come from her own misery, from her misery that was increasing all the time. She listened more intently: no, there was nothing, it was the voice of her own heart that stabbed her again and again.

On the first floor there was a sepulchral silence.

Giselda was shut up in her own room, to avoid any participation in the family troubles, and the two sisters in theirs, from which came not the faintest sign of life.

Five o'clock struck. Remo had not appeared. Of course, in all probability he would not come; in fact, he certainly would not come. He had thought better of it and decided it was useless to come; it would have been the height of effrontery to come back and fetch them; his gesture had been a mere piece of cleverness, a perhaps meaningless trick to conceal his real, very different, feeling; he had made it, of course, in order to lessen the importance of the evil thing he had done, he himself pretending not to rate it too highly, so that others should not rate it highly either—that was his usual game: fully understanding its gravity, he treated the thing lightly. It was better, better like that, better to leave the poor dears alone in their grief, in their worry over the signing of the promissory note. He was thus showing a greater respect for them, a truer understanding after the evil he had wrought, and it gave one a greater confidence for the future. Instead of "Summer Follies" it was good sense that was needed, and plenty of it, not only for the summer, but for winter and spring and autumn, for all the seasons of the year. This would prove to be the bad boy's last trick, and now he would begin to look at life in quite a different way: better, it was better like that. And as for the past, everything would come right in the end, there was always some sort of remedy for the past; what counts most is to start off right for the future.

By the time she had finished her washing up and had dried

everything and put it back in its place, had swept out the kitchen and set the window ajar with great care because of the flies, she thought she had made up her mind to go up to her mistresses and find out whether there was anything they wanted, whether they needed anything, whether they felt ill, and what she could do for them; she was ready to accept the reproofs and scoldings which she knew she deserved, and to apologize as her heart commanded her, for having failed to prevent the affair being concluded in accordance with the iniquitous designs of the wicked young man. But at the first stair she stopped and turned back: they would of course be asleep after all that hubbub. "After all they've been through they need to sleep; let's leave them alone, not go and disturb them." This solicitude was aimed, in reality, at easing her own mind, at allaying the intolerable uneasiness she felt at the idea of seeing them again. She went to the door to listen for the sound of the car. "Nothing. Better, much better like that, everything will come right of itself, in a natural way." It really seemed as though good sense had returned to the house after this last trial and were beginning to take effect. "Entertainments, indeed! Don't let us even speak of them. Of course they're lying on their bed with eyes closed, even if they can't sleep; they're like a couple of sick children lying on that bed, keeping their eyes closed so as not to see, not to know anything, pretending to be asleep so as to soothe their bewildered nerves." In the end they would really fall asleep, very gradually, without knowing it; a sound, refreshing sleep would do them good, would in fact be the saving of them. When they awoke, the memory of the ugly thing that had happened would have already begun to recede in their minds, and the rest would come of itself. That was why they did not call her: better to leave them alone. And Remo—that Remo should be beginning to show proof of seriousness, of altering his ways, that was the most comforting thing of all and gave the best hope for the avoidance of fresh troubles. He had caused enough of them already, but now he was beginning to understand that himself—that they were, indeed, too many,

and that the time had come to stop; he had begun to realize that and perhaps to be sorry for it, it could not be otherwise. However thoughtless and idle they may be, young men always have plenty of generosity at heart. As she was giving herself up to these consoling thoughts the sound of the motor horn, which she could recognize in a thousand, made her start; then she heard the car itself arrive at high speed. "It's him. Yes, it's certainly him. What cheek to come back like that! And what's he come for? To make another scene, perhaps? No, no, of course, he's come to get a bit of rest too; he'll go to his room and rest, lie down on the bed for a little; he needs sleep, he's come back to get some sleep, of course that's it. It would really be a bit too shameless if he was coming back to see if they wanted to go out for the evening, to go and amuse themselves, with things as they are: amuse themselves, indeed! Go out for the evening, indeed!" She went towards the gate, ready to tell him what a state the poor creatures were in, ready to impress upon him how inopportune his invitation was, in the event of his having the audacity to persist with it—ready for anything, in fact, for any sort of fight for justice's sake, to protect her mistresses, and not to let herself be disarmed or overcome a second time. "No more of that!" She drew herself up to her full height, so that all her flesh shook as she walked in this unaccustomed position. This time events should not catch her undecided, passive, unarmed; you had only to look at her to see that.

"Zi' Tè, Zi' Cà . . ." called Remo from the road, getting out of the car under his aunts' window, and without turning towards Niobe at all. "Zi' Tè, Zi' Cà . . ." His voice had its usual natural tone, with just a trace of an enticing, teasing quality in it.

"Zi' Tè, Zi' Cà," he repeated, coming in at the gate without raising his head, and adding a note of urgency to his voice.

Meeting Niobe, he asked her for a glass of cold water, as he was dying of thirst, and meanwhile Palle, in the road outside, was noisily turning the car so that it faced towards Florence. Niobe, who had run towards him to tell him to stop calling, to

say that he must not on any account disturb those two unfortunate women who had given no sign of life and who were in goodness knows what sort of a state, that he must not wake them, but must let them sleep in peace, because very probably they *were* asleep, or if they weren't asleep they were pretending to be, so as not to see and not to know anything, so as to forget what had happened, because they did not want to be disturbed by anybody, because they had no desire to speak to or to see a single living soul, and that was why they had shut themselves into their room. . . . Niobe, when asked for a glass of water, reacted instinctively, owing to her position as a servant: her master was dying of thirst and she must get him something to drink. And as she hesitated between the two alternatives, one of which urged her to confront him and open his eyes with regard to his aunts, the other, to fetch him something to drink because he was dying of thirst, it was the second which prevailed.

She ran off into the kitchen to fetch a glass. "It's the height of audacity, to call to them like that after what's happened, just as though nothing had happened at all; you need to be brazen-faced to act like that," she thought as she filled the bottle, "but aren't men all like that?" She went on thinking: "Or anyhow, isn't it the ones like that who are just the ones we like best? The virtuous ones, really and truly, don't mean very much to us, they leave us cold; we prefer to get into trouble with the flighty ones, that's our fate; they're the ones who make us lose our heads, and afterwards they give us a good thrashing. But this time you've made a bad shot, you've gone the wrong way about it, my dear boy, you'll have to wait a long time with your motorcar." She poured out a glass of water for him at the door and stood there, looking at him, with the bottle ready, waiting until he had drunk before she began to speak.

Remo gulped it down with a pleasure that it was a pleasure to see. The limpidity of his action rivalled the limpidity of the liquid which he allowed to slip down his throat.

"D'you want a drink too, Palle? Are you thirsty?"

Palle, who had turned the car and opened the bonnet, was inspecting the engine; he pulled his head out, turned and nodded, then closed the bonnet again and came over, making the gesture, while he was still at some distance, of taking the glass from the hand of the servant who was filling it. He gulped down the water with an avidity equal to that of his friend, but it seemed to slip surreptitiously down his short throat, while the whole of his person seemed anxious to conceal the coarseness of his movements, disguising it under a shyness that caused him to mumble a word or two that sounded more like an excuse than an expression of thanks.

Niobe did not know how to make a start, but she was determined to launch her attack at all costs and pursue her intended course even in face of this delay, as untimely as it was futile.

"Er . . . They're shut up in their room and they haven't even called *me*, so you see . . . They don't answer . . . In that state . . . they're quite right . . . They must have fallen asleep, they were so dreadfully tired, poor things . . . But you saw them yourself, you saw yourself what a state they were in . . . What d'you expect? . . . Or didn't you see them?"

Remo listened and looked at her as if he did not understand the meaning of her words, as if she were talking an unknown language or were going off her head; but he did not show the least sign of annoyance. And so Niobe, trying to make herself understood, became even more emphatic:

"You'll understand, of course . . . They can't have any desire to go out and amuse themselves, to go running round, to go out to dinner in the state they're in—that's quite obvious. . . . It'll have to be another time, some time when they're feeling well, when they're themselves again; it would be better if you'd go off by yourself this evening." It was the first time she had ever adopted this tone with the young man.

Remo looked at her and then looked all round—at the countryside, at the horizon, at the heat-flushed air of those last splendid days of May, with their intoxicating warmth and perfume; he

looked at her without answering even by so much as a nod. It seemed as though he did not attach the slightest importance to what she said, and yet he did not call again nor make any move to go up to his aunts' room: he merely stood there, on the top step outside the door, his hands in his pockets, his legs slightly apart, and his body swaying, in the waiting attitude, backwards and forwards.

From that silent chamber came a first faint sound, then a louder sound, the opening of a door, then voices and a great rustling on the stairs. Niobe held her breath. "Good Lord, what is happening? The scenes are going to start again." She was trembling, trembling at the idea of seeing her mistresses again, trembling for them, for their nephew, for herself, trembling for an impossible state of affairs, and at the same time summoning up courage so as not to be caught unawares a second time but to be ready to intervene and defend them. The time of reckoning was at hand for both of them, she thought, for the nephew and for herself. After careful reflection the two sisters were going to take decisive action; they had consulted together, they had had time to work out a plan, now they were going to act, to pursue an energetic, a ruthless course; they were going to take the measures that were necessary, and were coming downstairs like two furies, mad with rage, to drive both the servant and the young man out of the house, which they had every right to do. . . . (The noise on the stairs was terrific.) They would report them both to the police—herself as an accomplice; for it had been a regular act of extortion, with the addition of actual physical compulsion—a monstrous affair; and now they would be entangled in the meshes of the law. . . . The sounds and voices on the stairs made her head spin and her legs tremble, just at the moment when she wanted to be strong, when she *must* be strong. And as soon as the two sisters appeared together in the room, she almost fell to the floor. Never had they looked so pretty and so charming in their festal garb. Teresa was in purple, with green trimmings and yellow feathers, Carolina all in pale blue, with pink feathers. Never had

they been dressed up so elaborately, with so many trinkets and baubles: they tinkled and glittered as they moved, and their faces were thick with powder. And yet, beneath their powder, one of them still showed traces of indignation, the other, of tears. They had bracelets and necklaces, fans and eyeglasses, parasols for the sunset in the Cascine or at Fiesole. The servant stared at them, struggling to remain upright.

“Well, Niobe!”

“Where have *you* been all this time, I should like to know?”

They both smiled at her.

Not having the breath with which to answer them, Niobe tried to laugh, but her attempt merely caused a sudden, simultaneous jerk of her stomach and her lips, which was at once interrupted. She could not manage to laugh, so she stopped abruptly in order to try again. That same movement of the lips and the stomach might just as well have meant an effort to cry—an effort no more successful than the attempt to laugh: for there, right in front of her, stood something which paralyzed every vital movement at its source. She could not believe her eyes. Were these really her mistresses?

“In the kitchen, I was . . . yes . . . oh . . . tidying up . . . washing the dishes . . .” she stammered, bewildered. “That’s good . . . that’s good . . . you’re quite right—a little distraction . . . a very good idea . . . It’s such a lovely . . . such a lovely evening . . .”

“Remo.”

“Remo,” chirped the aunts.

“Where are you taking us?”

“Where are we going?”

“I told you, my dears,” Remo repeated in an insinuating, caressing voice, walking in front of them towards the car. “We’re going to have an *apéritif* at Narciso’s in the Cascine, then to dine at Fiesole, and then, about ten o’clock, to the Summer Follies; I’ve got the box already, the stage box that you like.”

“Narciso’s in the Cascine . . . dinner at Fiesole . . . and then

the Summer Follies," repeated the aunts as they got into the car, pretending to be learning what they already knew.

"And what's on at the Summer Follies?"

"Yes, what's on?"

"There's a new revue—*Woman, in Heaven, on Earth, and in the Sea.*"

"Ha! Ha! Ha!"

"Ha! Ha! Ha!"

Numbers of people had collected round to see them go off—women of all ages, crowds of boys, the usual group that the departing ladies saluted with ever-increasing dignity. And those who, behind their backs, were always making remarks—"Just like his grandfather! Just like their father! They've gone crazy!"—now stood there in openmouthed admiration. And then, at that moment of suspense which always precedes the starting of a motorcar, after the sisters had said: "Good-bye then, good-bye, Niobe! Good-bye, children! Good-bye, everybody!" from the window of their room came a voice which sounded like the cry of a bird of prey: "Pimp!"

In this difficult moment the two ladies succeeded in maintaining a demeanour so lofty that they gave not the faintest sign of having heard the voice; and the person to whom the word was addressed, by way of an immediate answer, turned the wheel and drove off. Palle, only, could not restrain an almost imperceptible smile and a childish movement reminiscent of the mocking gesture of a boy who has cleverly avoided a stone that another boy has angrily thrown at him.

Niobe, hands on hips, stood motionless and perplexed at the gate. This creature of the sunshine was beginning to see shadows in front of her and could no longer see clearly ahead with the extraordinary serenity with which she had always seen and which came from her heart. And although she did not know precisely what the two things were, she asked herself: "Is this life, or is it a play being acted?" The one was within the other: it was both at the same time.

CHAPTER VII

Peggy

REMO had never written at any length, but had merely sent post cards with a few affectionate words, with kind greetings, to his aunts: "I am well, how are you? Affectionate regards." He had been at Bologna, at Milan, and was now at Venice, where he proposed to spend the summer.

The aunts turned these cards over and over in their hands, examining them carefully in every detail, scrutinizing a mark, a dot, a smudge, the postage stamp. . . . They could never let them out of their hands. And since, in the corner of every one of them, was written: "Greetings, Palle," that was the only point that they contrived not to see; impossible to tell how they managed it; it was like meeting someone in the street whom you don't want to acknowledge, and you pretend not to see him when really you've seen him only too well. Everything had its recognized value, except for that signature whose value they did not intend to recognize. They would keep the cards on the table or on the embroidery frame, admiring the illustrations as they worked.

Had he found a job, was he going to settle down at last? Had he good prospects, poor young man? They too had written post cards in answer, addressing them to the various hotels he had indicated, begging him to write at greater length, to send them

some news, to inform them of his intentions and his prospects, of the life he was leading. But it was easy to see that, if he did not write at length, it was because he had not much that was comforting to tell his aunts. During his stay in Milan, particularly, they had been greedy for news. They knew that Milan is a city of commerce, of big industries, where it was possible to find a job, a position; and when they heard that he had gone on from Milan to Venice they wondered what he had gone to do there. They were puzzled. What work could he find in a town where people went merely to spend money? Merely to live and enjoy themselves. He had left at the end of May, two days after the imprisonment scene, and it was not until halfway through September that they had a letter. They turned pale when they saw it, and opened it with such violent haste that they tore the envelope, and even, between them, tore the letter itself, from an urgent desire to feel it, to touch it, rather than from impatience to read it. Niobe, too, was trembling with expectation.

My dearest Aunts,

Forgive me for not having written to you at length during all this time, but I had no news of importance to give you; and I merely wanted to tell you that I myself was well and to know that you were well also.

I am writing to you today to announce my marriage. I have become engaged to a young American lady whom I met here, in Venice, and whom I am going to bring to Florence in a few days' time to introduce her to you. We shall stay only a few days in Florence—just long enough to celebrate our wedding—and then we shall leave at once for New York, where my fiancée lives, so that I can get to know her father, who is a businessman there. Peggy, who knows Florence and its picturesque neighbourhood very well, joins with me in sending you affectionate greetings, to which I add my own particular embraces.

*Your nephew
REMO.*

The disappointments of their first, vanished hopes, the anguish of those first long periods of waiting, when the adventurous, precocious youth, playing truant from his studies and bent on freedom, absented himself for hours and hours, by day and by night; the very serious emotional blunders which they had had to remedy at so high a price and with so much distress; the debts they had had to pay, debts that grew larger and larger, culminating in the drama of the promissory note which had been signed in the store cupboard—none of these things had wounded them so deeply as the words of this letter; they seemed, at this moment, to realize that all the ups and downs they had endured with their nephew, all the struggles and all the tragedies, had not been sorrows at all, in the truest sense, and to be experiencing now, for the first time, sorrow naked and absolute. Whatever had happened, whatever he had done—and whatever he did even now, far away—they had felt him to be theirs; but with those few cold, measured words they felt that he had passed into the hands of another. Engaged to be married! Although Remo had played every kind of trick they always, in the end, understood him, they always, in the end, accepted him, after storms and angry scenes whose only purpose was to bring to a head the intervention that was intended to save him, and which, without their knowing it, consolidated their attachment to him. Remo engaged to be married they could not accept, they could not understand; something in their very blood, something at the depth of their being, rebelled at the notion, piercing them like a sharp sword. Engaged. They would have preferred anything to that one word. They read and re-read the letter: *“a young American lady whom I met here, in Venice, and whom I am going to bring to Florence in a few days’ time to introduce her to you . . .”* They broke off and looked at each other in a lost, dazed fashion, then started back suddenly as a painful thought struck them, penetrating their sorrow: it did not matter to them in the least whether they met her or not, not in the very least. They were completely and utterly indifferent about getting to know American young ladies. When Remo, the

first time, had brought eight or ten wild young men to Santa Maria at two in the morning, had awakened the household, emptied the larder, turned the dining room and the kitchen upside down, it had not produced such a commotion as this coming visit—which would be conducted, needless to say, with the utmost quietness and courtesy.

“Are they beautiful—American women?” murmured Carolina in desolation.

“They’re just like all other women,” replied Teresa (when she said “women” she appeared to be alluding to some kind of wholesale merchandise, or to eatables of elementary necessity). “Some are beautiful and some are ugly, and there are far more ugly than beautiful ones; you can be sure of that, it’s the same all the world over.” If they had been asked what the women of the world were like, all of them, one by one, the total number of beauties would have been discernible only through an arrangement of extremely powerful lenses. “They’re a graceless lot, on the whole.”

Carolina began to twist and wriggle in order to show off her own graces, in contrast to the gracelessness of the American women.

They reviewed carefully the American clients for whom they had worked, and the American women who had lived in the neighbourhood or whom they had heard talked about; but the examination did nothing to cheer them—quite the contrary, in fact.

“They’re modern women,” Carolina concluded.

“What d’you mean by that?”

“They’re not like us, staying indoors working all the time, or doing the household jobs; they’re emancipated, they go in for gymnastics and sport, they ride motor bicycles and drive cars, they do everything just like men; and when they cease to like one husband they say good-bye and take another one.”

“Nice sort of people!”

“We’re stupid, we are.”

"I wonder . . . in this world there's no telling who's right and who's wrong. And if they're not rich and want something to eat they have to do just as we do, those American young ladies. And if they haven't any servants they have to do their own housework, otherwise they live in dirt and mess, those American young ladies." She made a rude face.

" . . . We shall stay only a few days in Florence—just long enough to celebrate our wedding . . . "

"They're coming here to get married."

At this idea, Carolina's throat ached and she felt her breath fail.

"Of course."

" . . . then we shall leave at once for New York . . . "

"New York . . ." At the name of that city the hearts of the two poor old maids sank, as at the name of death itself.

They had not the heart to ask each other whether Remo's fiancée would be rich, not wishing to give each other confirmation of the thought that was tormenting them both. They felt that, this time, not even the inimitable Niobe would be able to find a remedy: the thing was not only real but imminent. They were stunned, as though they had received a blow on the head.

At table they could not help communicating to Giselda the news that their lips were incapable of keeping back.

"Do you know," said Teresa with a calm that concealed her interior turmoil, "Remo is engaged, he's getting married?"

"Who to, a strumpet?"

"Yes, like you."

Giselda said nothing more, and as soon as she had finished eating she rose and vanished.

A few days later they received a picture post card.

My dearest Aunts,

We shall be in Florence at the beginning of next week and will come and visit you at once; I want so much to see you again. Till then, greetings from Peggy and embraces from me. REMO.

In a little corner was written: "*Palle*."

"But what does that name mean? Peggy . . . Peggy . . .
What does it mean?"

"What a ridiculous name!"

"If she thinks we're preparing a grand reception for her she's got it quite wrong, poor thing; I shan't even give her anything to drink."

"I shall come down in my bedroom slippers."

Three days later, in fact, Remo reappeared, alone, at Santa Maria, turning the whole village upside down.

"He's alone."

"He's not letting her be seen."

"He's ashamed."

"I daresay she's hideous."

"She's probably quite old."

"Just some old bag with money."

"And quite soon he'll get rid of her."

"But is it really true he's engaged?"

"God knows what he's got up his sleeve."

There was no *Palle*, even, to draw aside and question. It was clear that Remo had no time to waste.

"An American."

"Now that he's sucked them dry, he's off to America to seek his fortune there."

"Poor old things!"

"They've had it properly, with that nephew of theirs."

"They've been silly."

"They've been fools.

"If you wish yourself ill, you never get enough of it."

When they saw him dropping in upon them unexpectedly, the aunts were unable to contain their emotion: they wept, they kissed him without any bashfulness or subsequent confusion, they clasped him in their arms and clung tightly, both of them, to his fresh young body.

Seeing that he must give them an outlet for their profound feel-

ing, he yielded completely to them. And it was only when their emotion began to calm down that they let go of him and looked at him: he was handsomer, fresher and more elegant than ever, with his sunburned skin.

He began, with perfect self-possession, to speak of his wedding.

The necessary papers were coming from America, and it would be some days before they arrived; otherwise all was in order, and the wedding, by the wish of the bride, would be celebrated at Santa Maria—yes, here in the country. Born and brought up in the tumult of great cities, and lover of the giddy life, Peggy, for her wedding, yearned for a moment of mysticism and poetry; she saw Santa Maria as a solitude, an ascetic, almost heavenly, retreat, which would provide an attractive change from her usual life as a modern sporting girl. Remo, for his part, uttered the word “wedding” with the same solemnity and naturalness with which one names some famous restaurant where one has decided to go for lunch or dinner.

The aunts observed him in astonishment at hearing him pronounce in such a way that sublime, terrible, mystery-enwrapped word which had hung always over their heads like a cloud heavy with rain.

“At Santa Maria?” they asked, astounded.

“Here?”

“Yes, precisely,” Remo repeated with a brilliant smile; “and you must accompany Peggy to the altar.”

“No.”

“No.”

“Not me.”

“Nor me either.”

“What are you thinking of!”

“Really!”

The two women talked like a whirlwind.

“We can’t, we can’t—whatever are you thinking of! . . . An American . . . Besides . . . she’s a grand young lady . . . and very rich . . . very rich, I imagine.”

"Yes . . . I daresay, pretty rich . . . I don't know . . . She's the only daughter of a New York industrialist—her father invented a cooking pot."

"A cooking pot?"

They both started. Niobe, in the doorway, started too. "My goodness, hadn't they even cooking pots in America?"

"A special kind of mechanical cooking pot, all made of metal, that cooks the beef in seven minutes and makes very good broth."

"Goodness gracious—and it takes me two hours!"

"She says he's made pots of money with this cooking pot."

"Then she *is* a very rich young lady."

"Peggy receives cheques regularly from her father. He used to send her a cheque for a thousand dollars every month, but when he heard she was engaged and that there were two of us, he started sending cheques for two thousand—a double ration—without Peggy saying anything; and he's promised an *extra* cheque for the wedding."

As a matter of fact, this was all Remo knew about his fiancée, and he had done nothing to find out more. It had not been a case, with him, of sordid greed to get possession of a marriage settlement, or of astute calculation, for the future had never been, for him, a tormenting thought, and the past was relegated to a dark cellar whose trap door he would never have dreamed of raising. What counted was the present, the fleeting instant; and he seemed to have been born with the knowledge of how to take advantage of it, to live the shining moment to the full, the moment that, once it has vanished into the dark cellar, no longer exists. Peggy received cheques, and that was all he wanted to know for the moment; he was not interested in knowing any more, he had no need to make selfish calculations, to ask inquisitive, repellent, tiresome questions with one eye to the future, to impose ignoble conditions—certainly not! He felt himself master of the present. "Life is easy" was his motto; and that was quite enough to *make* it perfectly easy, childishly so. His marriage was not a marriage of interest, he was not even thinking of "interest": the cheques

could not be sent back, they just arrived of their own accord.

“And has she lost her mother?”

“No, her father’s been divorced for many years.”

“Ah!” Teresa seemed to draw back at this piece of news, like someone who burns a finger or a foot and does not wish to show he is in pain.

Carolina gave her a knowing look to remind her of what she had said. “I told you so, I knew it, that’s what they all do, these American women, when they get tired of their husbands: it’s just ‘Good evening to you,’ and they send him to the devil and take another. It’s we who are stupid; *they* like change.”

Niobe’s eyes were shining in the doorway, like the eyes of a cat in the dark. She looked as if she thoroughly approved of the way American women behaved: she too was in favour of a change when things were not going well. In any case, when the harvest was so abundant, why be content with only a tiny part of it?

“And is she . . . young?”

“She’s twenty-four, the same as me.”

“And does she travel all by herself, at that age?”

“She began travelling when she was eighteen; she knows the whole world. She’s been three times in Italy; she’s very fond of Italy, and her father professes to be a Roman both in spirit and by origin.”

“And you . . . naturally”—it was difficult to put this question into words—“you are . . . in love . . . you love her . . . of course?”

“In love! . . . Ha! Ha! Ha!” Remo burst out laughing, then recovered himself. “Yes, yes, of course. Of course I love her, naturally.” He laughed as he had never laughed before. His whole soul was in that laugh. The word “love” had such a very different meaning for him and for them that it was impossible not to laugh when they spoke of it together, and he could not help laughing with complete sincerity. “Yes, of course . . . Ha! Ha!” Never had he laughed so loudly and so heartily, never had he looked so handsome as he laughed. The eyes of the three women sparkled.

Only with difficulty did they prevent themselves from leaping upon him and embracing him a second time. Their souls were rekindled in their bodies by a red-hot flame that ran all over them; relieved, they began to speak frankly and without pain.

“Peggy and I are good friends; we like each other, we’re fond of each other, that’s all; we like living together and we can build up an attractive, pleasant sort of life, anyhow for the present; we like the same things, we have the same tastes, the same dislikes.”

“All right, we’ll come to the wedding, yes, we’ll come.”

“Yes, yes,” confirmed Carolina.

Niobe, too, said yes from the doorway. “That’s all right now, that’s good, they’re quite right to go. Well, well, would you believe it!”

“Yes, yes,” they went on quickly, “yes, you must tell us when, because there’s no time to be lost; we’ll come, we’ll certainly come.”

“When will it be?”

Both of them, now, were delighted at the idea of accompanying the bride to the altar.

“In about a fortnight, I think—as soon as the papers are ready.”

“Yes, yes . . . in a fortnight’s time . . . yes, of course . . .”

Teresa was making calculations, and Carolina repeated:

“A fortnight . . . Well, well . . .”

They walked with their nephew to the car and waited to see him off, watching him recede into the distance, vanish. Then they went back into the house and could not help laughing with happiness.

“Ha! Ha! Ha!”

“Ha! Ha! Ha!”

“She’s rich and he doesn’t love her.”

“I knew it!”

“I told you so.”

“He’s marrying her for her money.”

“It’s not difficult to see that.”

“You saw how he laughed?”

“Ha! Ha! Ha!”
“Ha! Ha! Ha!”
“We’re good friends . . . Yes . . .”
“Ha! Ha! Ha!”
“We like the same things . . .”
“Fine sort of love, eh?”
“We like living together . . .”
“. . . ‘anyhow for the present’ . . .”
“Yes, indeed.”
“We have the same tastes . . .”
“The father’s cooking pot.”
“Ha! Ha! Ha!”
“Fine sort of love!”
“He’s marrying her for her money.”
“I knew it!”
“Of course he is.”
“It’s not difficult to see *that*.”
“After all, it’s quite natural. . . .”

“What will she be like?”
“What will she be like?”

It was not only the aunts who were wondering what she would be like, this young lady whom Remo had chosen to be his wife, or by whom he had allowed himself to be chosen as husband; for even the unbelievers had ended by believing. Everyone wanted to see what this woman was like, about whom so many doubts, so many calculations, so many wild speculations were rife. And the moment the rumour spread that Remo would be arriving with her during the afternoon of the next day, from noon onwards the road was full of comings and goings, of people on the watch, people making signs to each other and passing on information, heads poking out of doors and windows. Curiosity and impatience oozed from every hole.

What could she be like, the fiancée of the young man who, for ten years, had been filling the countryside with the stories of his

exploits, the young man whose own person had presented the most fascinating of all spectacles?

Certainly—that much was clear—she could not be any ordinary creature. Remo would not appear in company with a timid, embarrassed little girl who would lower her eyes when anyone spoke of her or addressed a word to her, and whose legs would be trembling as she came to be introduced to her future aunts. Curiosity would be justified: in any case, there would be something worth seeing. And the surprise would be all the greater if the man who had made such great claims, who had displayed such assurance and swagger, such haughtiness, had been satisfied with some very modest, ordinary little thing. What if she were ugly? What if he had behaved like a bluebottle, which after buzzing loudly round finally settles upon a certain thing whose name cannot be mentioned? What if she were old? What if he were saddling himself with some old harridan, some strumpet, for the sake of her money, now that he had run through all his aunts' savings? Everyone repeated, indeed, to the point of satiety, that the bride was twenty-four; but she might be one of those elaborately got-up old women who go on saying they are twenty even when they are sixty. What if she were lame or squint-eyed, hunchbacked, fat, deaf, yellow, a Negress? It is quite impossible to understand why no one imagined this woman in an ordinary, normal state. It was only the girls who waited without saying anything: in their hearts was a faith that could not betray them.

“It’s Greta Garbo! It’s Greta Garbo!” they exclaimed, choking with excitement when they saw, jumping out of the car, a very young woman, tall and slim, wearing a short black woollen dress which showed off to advantage the agility of a body exercised by dancing and by youthful games and sports; on her head a little bright red felt cap which threw into relief her magnificent golden hair, waved and curled and very carefully arranged. It was an agility very far removed from poor Carolina’s pathetic, pointless contortions.

The young woman stopped in the middle of the road to examine the place, smiling in a self-possessed, satisfied way. She turned slowly round as she observed not only her surroundings but the people who, according to their degree of shamelessness or timidity, were staring at her from varying distances. She rested the palm of her hand on her hip, and the fingers, held slightly away from her belt, balanced a cigarette.

“It’s Greta Garbo! It’s Greta Garbo!”

The girls’ hearts could not betray them: Rudolph Valentino, Ramon Novarro, Charles Farrell, Gary Cooper could marry only Greta Garbo.

The others remained dumb, being unable, for the moment, to find any weak point, any crack or flaw by which to attack this first favourable impression. And so, finding nothing to strike at in her external qualities, they adduced doubts as to her moral ones.

“D’you think she’s respectable?”

“Um . . .”

“D’you think she’s really rich?”

“You don’t think she’s one of those . . . ?”

“Where does her money come from?” (They themselves, wherever it came from, would have been pleased to accept it.)

“She smokes, she’s not the real thing, I don’t like that.”

The young women, on the other hand, would have liked to be in her shoes, without reserve, whatever she was like. And some hidden instinct was already making them move their arms in an attempt to achieve that elegant gesture with the cigarette.

The aunts did not make an appearance at the gate, or even at the front door. They did not display any over-eagerness to go and meet their future niece, nor did they intend to make her visit in any way a solemn occasion. When the two young people appeared, they raised their heads from their work, calmly took off their spectacles, and greeted her without a shadow of emotion or excitement, just as if she were a client. It was only work—which they no longer loved and which had become merely a

harsh necessity of life—that could still lend them so much strength, so much self-confidence, so much beauty. Unconsciously they felt this; they were like a king upon his throne, and they clung to that throne in the hour of misfortune, to that throne which neither rivalry nor hatred could touch. They both rose at the same time, with a composed, rather leisurely movement, without stepping forward and with scarcely a smile, as though to listen to a client's order, sniffing the air.

“Zi’ Tè, Zi’ Cà,” said Remo with deferential politeness, well satisfied, as he presented his fiancée to his aunts. Any kind of reception would have met with the same unruffled temper on his part—whether he had been thrown out on his head, or had a bucket of water flung over him, or been pelted with stones; or whether a ball had been given in his honour. And, since someone had appeared in the doorway at the back, in the half-darkness, attracting the women’s attention away from their rather chilly greeting—

“Nini!” he added in a burst of joviality, running over and putting his arm round Niobe, who was reluctant to advance farther forward. “My dear old Nini!” he repeated, clasping her to him in the most affectionate manner.

Peggy greeted the servant with a quick smile and two little nods. Then she went on looking round the aunts’ workroom in the same fashion as she had looked round before, in the road, when she had jumped out of the car, making it quite clear that she was more interested in places and things than in people. Then, assailed by an impulse of tenderness, she exclaimed: “Ah! The monkeys . . . the monkeys you bewitched!”

“No, my dear, no,” corrected Remo in a gay, gentle tone. “I trained them—I just trained them.”

He seemed a different person. He had become attentive, kindly, talkative; and, as he understood how very difficult it would be to fuse together those heterogeneous forces, he intervened constantly, filling in awkward gaps, avoiding dangerous turns in the conversation. He explained the workings of the house to Peggy, and

his aunts' profession, while the latter exchanged knowing looks and little wicked laughs. "Now it's up to you to get yourself domesticated, and I daresay he'll manage it." They were neither moved nor troubled by the presence of the young woman, but wary, and anxious to keep all their hostile feelings hidden; they were, in fact, slightly ironical, and more mundane than they had ever been amongst all their chemises and drawers. In ten years they had learned many things. Their hearts were filled with the words of Remo's answer to that all-important question. "He doesn't love her, he doesn't love her." These words beat in their hearts like the mechanism of a watch—"He doesn't love her, he's marrying her for her money"—and they guarded them jealously. Not a sign must be given, either to her or to him, of this interior force that illumined their souls, that lightened their sorrow. "He doesn't love her." The presence of the victim brought a profound and bitter pleasure; and they had the double joy of concealing it and keeping it for themselves, by showing complete indifference, as though for someone who had nothing whatever to do with them. She wanted to say that they were parrots or monkeys, without even knowing what she was talking about, poor silly fool; the real parrot was herself, who did not even know how to speak; it was she who was the real monkey to be trained—trained already, in all probability. This made them laugh and laugh and laugh, split their sides with laughing; yet they did not laugh so that it could be noticed, they took the greatest care not to laugh visibly so that they might laugh twice as much in their hearts, without letting her suspect anything and so as to let her be well and truly caught in the trap set for her; they laughed for themselves, simply for themselves. "We hope he'll do at least twice as much to you as he's done to us," was what their composed, indifferent smiles were saying. And to think that they would be ready to let him do just as much again! "But if he made you into a sausage it still wouldn't be all you deserve."

Remo showed his fiancée the house—the parlour, the dining room; he took her up to his room, where they remained together

for a long time in silence; Peggy's only remark was when she looked out of the window over the fields and could not help exclaiming: "Oh! How charming!" at the view of the chains of hills. He described with warmth the skill of his aunts, who were famous all over the city, and the simple habits of his family of adoption, speaking with manly assurance, feeling no necessity to hide anything or to add artful embellishments, but explaining things just as they were, frankly and clearly. To all of this Peggy's invariable reply was: "Oh yes, of course," as she gazed, impassive in her own happy state of mind, at the idyllic countryside. "Really, indeed."

The aunts followed their discourse with little smiles—"Yes, of course, indeed, naturally . . . that's it . . . exactly!"—which effectually concealed the light in their hearts. "He doesn't love her, he's marrying her for her money."

The refreshments, too, could not have been more frugal. Niobe brought in a small tray with little glasses on it and a dish with a few biscuits. How different from the treatment given on that far-off afternoon to the Headmistress, Signorina Squilloni, when Remo had to take his elementary certificate!

"No doubt the signorina is accustomed to take tea at this time of day, but we don't care for that sort of ditch water, we never take it—we find it very nasty, in fact."

"Ugh! No better than a dose of medicine!"

"We're not accustomed to it. We have the wine from our own hills, which is extremely good"—even local rivalry yielded in face of rivalry of feeling—"and we prefer it to tea."

To which Peggy replied by complete agreement with their tastes.

"Just like medicine, yes."

She did not like tea either, but preferred good wine, which she drank with the liveliest satisfaction.

The sisters looked at each other in surprise. "She must be a drunkard; perhaps that's why she's running round this part of the world—in order to booze as much as she can, because they

don't allow her to drink over there. She's a drunkard, that's it; what a pity we didn't make her a nice cup of tea!"

Peggy accepted a second glass with enthusiasm when it was offered to her—without spontaneity, out of pure politeness—and gulped it down, saying: "Very nice indeed."

"Ugh!" Carolina could not restrain an exclamation, continuing all the time the wordless dialogue with her sister. "What did I say? She's a drunkard; she drinks and smokes; the rest I leave to your imagination."

Peggy, in truth, had not ceased smoking for one instant; when she finished one cigarette she lit another one from it, pulling out a cigarette case as big as a prayer book from a pocket—like the pocket of an apron—in her elegant dress.

At one moment she offered one to the aunts.

"Eh? What?" Teresa started back, offended, as if unwilling to credit the gesture. "What? You think *I* smoke?"

And Carolina drawled:

"Come, come now, what d'you suppose? We're not accustomed to it, we don't even know what it means to smoke. . . ."

Remo laughed, and Niobe with him.

"Besides, you know, we're poor people, there are certain luxuries we can't afford; we're workingwomen . . . as the signorina can see."

"Oh yes," said Peggy, entirely absorbed in her own idyllic sensations, which made her see an idyll even in these two women who would have been delighted to scratch her eyes out, and of whose real state of mind she understood nothing whatever.

"We're poor people, we're workingwomen," they repeated, stressing each syllable, speaking with great emphasis, certain that they were vexing the young lady—whereas it was exactly what was required to give her the greatest possible pleasure; she wanted nothing more.

As for Remo, he would have smiled in just the same way if they had been telling her that they went out at night on housebreaking expeditions.

Peggy declared that her father, as a young man, had been no more than a workman, an ordinary, honest, intelligent workman, who had made a fortune by his own hard work and his own brains.

“With a cooking pot,” said Teresa unkindly.

“A cooking pot, yes; he has a very big cooking-pot factory.”

From chemises and drawers he had ended up amongst cooking pots. It had to be admitted that Remo always landed on his feet. Nevertheless, he decided to cut this visit short.

“It’s time, you know, Peggy; we ought to go, we’ve lots of things to do.”

The young lady wished to see the church where, in a few days’ time, she was going to give her hand in marriage; and when she stood in front of it, followed and surrounded at a respectful distance by numbers of inquisitive people, she showed herself enthusiastic, moved, and said that she wished to have a wedding exactly like a typical Florentine country wedding.

Remo, who had already spoken to the parish priest, answered: “As soon as we have the papers, my dear; don’t worry.”

“All right.”

Over by the car they were all worrying Palle, trying to dig information out of him: “Palle! Palle!”—trying to find out what they were doing, where they were going, where they were living in Florence, and whether it was true that she was so very rich. The young man managed, with some difficulty, to elbow his way out of this persistent cross-examination, which was quite intolerable to him.

Peggy stopped every now and then and looked very slowly all round her, her hand on her hip with the lighted cigarette between her fingers, breathing in the idyllic perfume of these last quickening days of September.

“It’s Greta Garbo! It’s Greta Garbo!” the bystanders kept on whispering to each other: “It’s Greta Garbo!”

“D’you like her?” the aunts asked each other as soon as they were alone.

“No, I don’t; do you?”

“She has an ugly mouth.”

“It’s ugly when she speaks.”

“And how about when she laughs?”

“My goodness, what a mouth!”

“She never ought to open it.”

It was the only fault they could find with this very beautiful creature—the over-emphatic, inharmonious movements of her mouth when she laughed or talked, movements which revealed clearly, not merely a plebeian origin, but an original vulgarity, and produced a discordant note in the otherwise admirable picture. And the Materassis, without a moment’s hesitation, had spotted it.

“But what a way to talk, anyhow!”

“It’s enough to give you a stomach-ache to listen to her.”

“Your wife and your cattle from your own country—that’s what I say,” concluded Teresa in a decisive manner.

It was Niobe who brought things back into focus.

“Get along with you! They make a handsome pair, the two of them, him dark and her fair; and she has a good figure, she’s not an ugly girl, let’s admit it. And that hair of hers! Why, I always knew he liked blondes.”

Everyone will be thinking that there had been only one person at Santa Maria who had not wanted to see Remo’s fiancée—Giselda. But no, that is not true; the poor thing, shut up in her room, was caught in the act as she was peeping out from a corner of her window, with the greatest possible caution, in an attempt to catch a sight of her. Remo, with his usual well-known adroitness, looked up suddenly at that precise moment; and before you could say “knife,” she had vanished.

Peggy, as we have already remarked, wished her wedding to be—as she expressed it—as “Florentine” as possible, with all the usual customs and ingredients and good-fellowship of the countryside. And since she was unable to arrive at any idea, even

an approximate one, of what its real size and nature would be, she confused the two terms, understanding by "Florentine" a "country" wedding. And thus it turned out so extremely Florentine and so extremely countrified that no one had ever seen the like of it in those parts.

As for Remo, he, for his part, set no limitations upon it; any adjective would have done, as far as he was concerned. For him, clearly, the question of the cheques was the only one upon which there could be no compromise; on all other questions discussion was unnecessary.

When Peggy asked the dressmaker how long a train a Florentine bride usually wore, and was told: "Four yards at the most, not more," "Eight yards then!" she replied drily. And her answers were such as to admit of no objection. The dressmaker merely pointed out that two children would not be enough to hold it up. "Four children then!" she retorted, and she uttered the word "four" with such energy as to let it be supposed that forty or four hundred would not cause her the slightest embarrassment.

The church was smothered in white flowers, with great bunches of tall-spiked tuberoses that formed magnificent fountains amongst hundreds of candles. The smell was so powerful that humble, ecstatic spectators turned giddy.

From the Africo to the Mensola, little bags of sweetmeats had been distributed in abundance, and pretty goblets of glass, or china, or silver. And a certain envelope had been handed to the parish priest, so that even the poorest people might celebrate this memorable day in worthy fashion. The "extra" cheque which arrived from America must also have been for an extra-large amount.

Remo was right when he said that life was simple—extremely simple, indeed, for now money poured ceaselessly from the sky. He never spoke of income, of calculations or of figures, of the sordid, brutal, vile affairs in which man wastes the best part of himself, against which his own mind—disinterested and impa-

tient of calculations and figures as it was—would have rebelled; and still the cheques arrived just the same.

The greatest difficulty was to find a good band. Apart from the orchestras in the town, which were modern and refined and unsuitable for the rustic type of entertainment they aimed at, it was difficult to rake up anything possible in the neighbouring villages. Settignano, which in the past had an excellent band, now contented itself with a would-be military affair consisting of a few trumpets blown by a small group of cheerful young men marching up and down the square with a quick, *bersagliere*-like step. There could be no question of asking help from proud Fiesole; thousand-year-old rivalries with the surrounding villages, because of her autonomy, have created susceptibilities which are never at rest and which not even America could reconcile; they burst forth, they leap out at the slightest shock, so that no one would ask her even for holy oil for extreme unction. It was only at Compiobbi that a real, proper band could be found which accepted the job together with the fanfare from Settignano, which had already been engaged.

From the Africo to the Mensola, in all the nearby villages, the news of this exceptional wedding had spread. Remo was very well known in the neighbourhood; he was like the betony plant all along the Settignano road. Everyone knew him and everyone knew the aunts, and they knew also the fullest details of their story and of their changes of fortune: so that the whole population, that morning, crowded in a mass to Santa Maria.

The religious ceremony was fixed for eleven o'clock, and already at nine, people were beginning to assemble, standing about in groups, talking of this strange occurrence, such as never, within the memory of man, had been recorded in the district. They stood in the little square and along the road in the vicinity of the still closed church, from the door of which ran a red carpet reaching to the point where the motorcars would stop—a carpet upon which, just as though it were of water or fire, no one dared venture a foot.

At half-past ten the trumpeters from Settignano arrived in a lorry, and a little later, in another, larger one, the band from Compiobbi. The priest had opened the little gate into his vegetable garden, by which the bandsmen, who had put down their instruments while they waited, could go in and out, while the crowd grew steadily and became very thick in front of the church, everyone looking towards the door and the red carpet leading from it. The Materassis' house, from all the curiosity that was shown it, might have been the Town Hall itself: everyone was talking about them and their nephew. Two cameras stood ready on their high tripods. If there had only been some cake stalls and ropedancers, you might have thought it was fair-day at Santa Maria.

At this precise moment a large closed car, very glossy and expensive-looking, with a footman beside the driver, was engaged in turning round in the road, displacing, fanwise, the crowd that had gathered there: it stopped in front of the rust-eaten, white iron gate, which had always remained half closed when countesses, marchionesses and duchesses, mitred priests and kept women had had to pass through it. But today, for a more extraordinary occasion, both sides of it were open.

As soon as the big car had come to a standstill and the footman had got out and taken up his position by the door, the crowd, like a swarm of bees, clustered round it to watch the departure of the aunts, who were going to Florence, where the procession was being formed.

This was the first item in the day's programme, nor was it the least surprising, as was shown barely five minutes later, during which time everyone had been making wild guesses as to the dresses and hats that the two sisters would be wearing—their shape, their colour, their possible trimmings. . . . Suddenly a series of ah's and oh's and ooh's, in every tone of voice, irrepressible or ill-repressed or positively ill-mannered, ran along the crowd, which seemed almost to fall back in stupefaction. From the door, down the steps, towards the gate, slowly and solemnly

advanced two old women dressed as brides. The Materassis were wearing the ritual garment of white satin and were completely covered with long veils fastened on their heads; they also wore very long trains, which Niobe, following close behind like a dog that wants to welcome several people at a time, and running from one to the other, found great difficulty in spreading out so that they should not get entangled in them as they walked. They had little bunches of orange blossom in their hair, and wore orange blossom at their waists, at their breasts, and at the edges of their skirts.

“Ah!”

“Oh!”

“Ooh!”

It was not easy to restrain the feelings aroused by such a sight. As they approached the car they maintained a demeanour of the loftiest composure, even though the legs of both were trembling so that they could scarcely walk. As they got in, their faces were not merely pale, but green, spectral, livid. They tried at first to answer the jeers and laughter and exclamations of the crowd with smiles of the greatest nobility; and then, more haughtily, but still ineffectually, with looks of disdain. Once they were inside the car, Carolina's eyes were veiled in tears, but Teresa, with an ever-hardening expression on her face, turned and faced the window and the festive crowd and made a rude noise at them. The muscles of her face, strained to breaking point, prevented her from completing this unbecoming act; but it did, nevertheless, succeed in reducing the volume of pleasantries. She seemed to be answering these ill-mannered people in the same way as she had answered her sister a few days before, to cut short a dispute: “Yes, we can; *we* can wear orange blossom and hold our heads high too; whether the bride can, goodness only knows. . . .” And, the better to convince her, she had added: “How about these village hussies who are already with child on their wedding day?”

The truth of the matter was that Peggy did not really know,

herself, what she should wear, nor what other people were wearing; and the question which, for the two old maids, represented the drama of a whole lifetime was, for her, no more than a negligible detail of scarcely an hour's duration. All she wanted was to dress up as much as possible, according to her own capricious, youthful ideas, and for other people to do the same; she was not a person to be stingy where freedom was concerned. All she insisted upon was a wedding both Florentine and countrified. And it must be admitted that everything was well set to that end.

As for Remo, his aunts might have arrived dressed up as harlequins or like our primal mother Eve, who never knew a dress-maker; he would not have made the smallest comment upon their costume.

Now it must be added that amongst the crowd, after that first, entirely spontaneous movement of surprise, a report had spread which somewhat mitigated the hilarity, to the effect that, in "society" weddings, in the very highest spheres, amongst princesses and queens, the ladies of the bridal suite always wear white, with veils on their heads, like the bride herself. Some people gave an assurance that they had seen this in the Sunday papers. And so they took back, to some extent, the exclamations of irreverent joy which had provoked, on the part of Teresa, a far from regal, or even princely, reply.

After the Materassis had departed, the crowd swarmed back and took up its position in front of the church, forming two thick hedges on either side of the red carpet upon which no one dared to set foot, waiting for that hour of eleven o'clock which never seemed to come, although it was so near. The photographers, too, waited beside their cameras, which were covered by black cloths such as conjurors use. Then, at last, the approach of the procession was announced by excited movements on the part of those who had stayed at doors or windows or along the road, and by those few people who had not been able to leave their houses or shops and had to be satisfied with seeing it go past, or who, leaving them at the last moment, were running to reach the

church in time. And when the first motorcar appeared at the bend in the road, the trumpet blowers from Settignano burst forth with a military march.

The motorcars followed each other, all in line, at brief, equal distances, and approached slowly, at the dignified pace of a parade.

In the first car, a two-seater driven by himself, was Remo with his bride; and crouching behind them, like an owl on a perch, was the faithful Palle in a dazzling new blue suit and a dove-grey cap pulled down to his eyes, in his usual fashion.

Then followed three large closed cars, all of the same size, with footmen sitting beside the drivers; these contained the *ex officio* members of the retinue. In the first were the four children who were to be trainbearers, in the second the aunts, alone, and in the third the four witnesses, chosen from amongst Remo's friends. Then came eight or ten cars of different kinds, large and small, open or closed, in which were the friends of the bridegroom, as many as four or five to a car. All wore top hats and morning coats, as beffited the exalted nature of the ceremony. The tables of the best-known cafés in the centre of Florence were half empty that morning.

The photographers, appearing and disappearing under their black cloths, performed their mysterious conjuring tricks.

Of women there were none, except the bride and the aunts; or rather, the three brides, the young one and the two old ones, who were now encouraged and sustained in the playing of their part by a new feeling. They carried within them a word which gave them support and strength to bear up and to keep going. Their virgin whiteness concealed a blood-red shaft, as it were a dagger or a revolver: "He doesn't love her, he's marrying her for her money." They were ready to follow her, to smile at her, to the very end, anywhere. She herself was in truth, without realizing it, the bewitched monkey. It was this that gave them the strength to get in and out of the car, to pass with heads held high through the crowds which, seeing them, could not help laughing; trail-

ing solemnly, beneath their veils, three yards of snow-white train, and announcing to everybody with eyes of malice: "It's not true, don't believe it, this isn't a serious thing, it's not a proper wedding, it's just a show. He's marrying her for her money, he doesn't love her, he told us so; he gave us to understand that she's rich and he's marrying her for her money, he hardly even knows who she is."

Peggy, as she got out of the car, threw away a cigarette which she had only just lit and which was hastily picked up by an urchin who wormed his way between the legs of the spectators. Her gesture sent a shudder through the crowd at seeing, for the first time, a young bride swathed in white veils and white flowers throw away a cigarette as she approached the altar.

"A very modern bride," someone remarked in a low voice. Fascinated, the girls kept repeating: "Greta Garbo! Greta Garbo! Greta Garbo can smoke wherever she likes. . . ." And turning their attention to the bridegroom, they whispered the names of all the male stars that thronged their dreams.

It was quite a complicated problem to get the eight yards of train out of the car, spread them out, and then, with the four children, two on each side, holding them up, to proceed forwards on a steady course. Their wearer's slimness and agility were displayed as she performed evolutions so rapid that they seemed like veritable exhibitions of skill before the crowd's astonished faces, surrounded, as she was, by about forty young men who had jumped out of their cars and come to form an escort for her, making a kind of kaleidoscope all round her with their brilliantly shining top hats and moving hither and thither, unable to restrain their vigorous, exuberant gaiety. And when Peggy, to the sound of the organ, and in the midst of a cold astonishment such as might have been caused by the sight of an unknown star in the heavens, reached the footstool in front of the altar, her train stretched almost to the door of the little church, which was scarcely longer than it.

The crowd was now allowed to enter, and came bursting in

with a blind rush in the hope of securing vantage points from which to watch the ceremony.

If it was not exactly a "Florentine country wedding," as had been intended, it was certainly an original one. There was something odd about all the participants that might have been noticed even by the least sensitive of critics.

In Peggy, that angelic garb failed to disguise the contours of the woman who plays games and is an accomplished performer of the latest dances; her concentration, itself rather excessive, also failed her from time to time, betraying its real superficiality—the superficiality of one who is acting a part with exaggerated zeal. Palle's face was so set, so severe, that it looked positively menacing, while those of the aunts were strained and livid, with painful smiles imprinted upon them which made them look even older in their nuptial garb. The effect of strangeness was heightened by the presence of such a large number of giddy young men whose physical appearance showed obvious traces of their habits and activities, and in face of whom it was impossible to attain the seriousness and quiet that the occasion demanded, since even when they were silent and motionless they still produced a kind of explosive effect. The rowdy gang was here in full force, and the nocturnal devourers of those golden omelettes that Niobe knew how to make so miraculously seemed to be declaring, not merely that this was not a serious thing, but that it was not even real, perfectly real though it was. The Florentine, the country, wedding, organized by someone who was neither Florentine nor countrified, had developed into this. It might have been thought that, underneath their ceremonial garments, everyone was wearing gymnast's trunks—even the bride, even the aunts—and that at any moment they would rapidly strip and start performing leaps and somersaults and feats of strength and agility. Something between an operetta and a circus.

The Compiobbi municipal band played the triumphal march from *Aïda*, and then the Mass began, to the accompaniment of the mystic chorus from *Norma*. Both the band and the trumpet-

ers had lent their services to play outside in the square, and they had nothing to do with the religious function, even though they played while it was going on. The photographers-conjurors had transported their bags of tricks to the sides of the altar, and first one and then the other would let off his flashlight, with a "pflam!" which flustered everyone and made them jump just at the moment when the photographers' prodigies were being performed: "Pflam! Pflam!"

In the midst of so many surprising and discordant features, only one person was capable of maintaining a faultless bearing. That was Remo. Correct, self-possessed, elegant in the beautifully fitting morning coat which displayed his figure to perfection, he showed not an instant's awkwardness or uncertainty, not a sign of tomfoolery or vulgarity; he was attentive and courteous as he walked beside his bride to conduct her to the altar, and he remained standing close to her in an attitude of the greatest dignity. At the supreme moment of the celebration he appeared sweetly absorbed in the sanctity of the rite, without betraying any emotional disturbance. In contrast with all the others, his whole figure was in perfect harmony with the moment and the surroundings.

The young priest, as he officiated, as he tied that sacred, indissoluble knot, observed him; he was attracted by his whole person, by his demeanour—in fact, he seemed to be attracted only by him—and it was as if all the rest were remote and strange. In spite of the great difference in their way of life and in their intelligence, there had become established between the two young men a close bond of sympathy, unexpressed or only hinted at shyly, but felt by both as something impregnable, and now, at this austere, sweet moment, in process of being consolidated. The priest was strangely and nobly touched by the bearing of the young man, more than by any of the other people who had squeezed into the church to get a glimpse of what was going on.

Just behind the place where the bride and bridegroom were kneeling stood two gilt armchairs for the aunts, who stood or sat

according as the ceremony demanded; their faces displayed no sign of emotion, for they had within them a transfiguring drug, a narcotic which never ceased working, and they smiled instead of weeping, with a poisonous smile which was like a brand upon their faces. They seemed to be waiting, at every moment, for something or other, amongst the crowd which stared at them and seemed, in its turn, to be awaiting something from them. "Don't believe it, it's just a piece of buffoonery; it's a marriage without love, he's marrying her for her money. Love? . . . Oh yes . . . The dog ate it."

Before the Elevation, the band in the square outside played that piece from *Rigoletto*: "Within the sacred building, as I prayed, that handsome, fatal youth came before my eyes . . ." The handsome, fatal youth, to be exact, had come before Peggy's eyes, several days running, as he went in or out of the entrance hall, decorated in the Turkish style, of the Hotel Danieli in Venice; but that is an unimportant detail.

The crowd grew more and more restless, owing to the smallness of the church, and, since the greater part of it had been forced to remain outside, from inside you could hear a noise like the ebb and flow of the tide. At one of the side altars, some candles fell, causing a certain confusion.

If, in the midst of that queer, restless crowd, whose minds were divided between the beauty and charm of the ceremony and the vague smell of scandal, only one person had been able to maintain an attitude of self-assured dignity, there was only one who had been able to give way to her own best feelings—Niobe. Having entered the church by way of the priest's house and hidden herself behind the altar, she was in floods of tears, of foolish, genuine tears. From a heart greedy of life, from eyes greedy of beauty, she wept for the ten years of happiness, for the second youth which the young man had been able to give her by his mere presence in the house, and which were now finished forever.

When the ceremony was over and the people were coming out

of church the Compiobbi band, their thoughts already, perhaps, on glasses waiting to be refilled, struck up with the toast song from *Traviata*. And the photographers-conjurors again thrust their heads in and out of the black cloths on the tops of the high tripods. It had to be admitted that the Settignano trumpeters, although their repertory was somewhat limited, carried it through with an impetus that was quite unusual. They repeated their *bersagliere* song, the trombone working with redoubled energy, and continued while the procession re-formed and the guests got back into their motorcars.

Peggy, for her part, accustomed as she was to the explosions of jazz, judged that these tunes were played to perfection and that the atmosphere of the country idyll had been achieved. Flowers, for her, sprouted everywhere. She felt she had found true pathos and was delighted—especially as she also felt prepared to take a sudden jump out of it the moment it began to bore her—and she did not notice that nothing of this was true. She was conscious of a crazy desire to embrace everybody and say some kind word to them, one of those words that her fiancé had taught her for the occasion—*delizioso, incantevole, paesano, silvano, agreste*, etc.—and which she pronounced in a highly approximative manner. She felt an irrepressible longing to embrace everyone and give them kisses or, at least, sweetmeats, even those who looked at her with clenched teeth, even the aunts who concealed daggers beneath their whiteness and poison in their acid smiles. “He doesn’t love her, he’s marrying her for her money.” Words, to her, incomprehensible and untranslatable into any language; and which, if they had been able to make her understand their real meaning, would have made her laugh heartily. What, for them, was a drama in which they were concerned to the last drop of their blood, for her would have been merely another cause for laughter.

The procession, which moved off slowly in the direction of Florence, was joined by the two lorries containing the band and the trumpeters, all of them standing erect, with their instruments

and their caps like tram conductors'; and all along the road, till they reached the first houses of the town, they played, alternately, the march from *Aida* and the toast from *Traviata* (the wine-cups were really getting nearer now), while the Settignano fanfare repeated its *bersagliere* song—always the same tune, but with ever-increasing force and expression.

When they came into the streets of the town the procession moved along in silence, except for the irrepressible sounds of youthful gaiety; causing people to stop, or to run up and look at it, all along the road, and arousing the liveliest curiosity. Most people thought it must be the wedding of a princess; others imagined that a beauty queen had just been elected; others, again, that a film was being made, with Greta Garbo in it. Even in Florence, those who had no idea of what was happening kept on saying: "It's Great Garbo! It's Greta Garbo!"

The wedding breakfast was given in two large rooms at the hotel where the bridal couple were staying. They themselves were in the first room with their friends and intimates, and in the other room were the musicians and a great many other people. The meal was not so much gay and cheerful as extremely noisy—rowdy, in fact, energetic, athletic. The idyll had been left behind in the country and nobody remembered it any more. The joy of these young men, which had been restrained with such difficulty—and even then not entirely—during the religious ceremony, underwent a natural compression at the first few mouthfuls of food, but, after a few sips of champagne, started to burst forth in a crescendo of irresistible enthusiasm, culminating in a shout which, issuing from all those twenty-year-old chests, saluted the friend with whom they had shared so many good times.

Side by side, at the head of the oval table, were the bridal couple, and on Remo's left, side by side, sat the aunts. Teresa, occupying the place next to her nephew, displayed sufficient self-possession, even though her grief-stricken face now looked like a piece of wax on the point of dissolving. Carolina, frightened, clung to her side, as if she were suffering from the cold which

was reflected on to her face from her white, glossy dress, and wanted to take refuge and hide. It looked as though Remo were sitting amongst three brides, nor did he appear to find this number too many or of questionable quality—not at all: he shared himself amongst them all in the most brilliant and natural manner, making it appear as if he would not have minded a great many more, and of any quality whatsoever.

Next came two close rows of young men, about forty in all, twenty on each side of the table. Some of them, who did not possess top hats and morning coats, had come straight to the breakfast. And at the other end of the table, alone, serious, and thoughtful, sat Palle, frowning almost, absorbed in the magnificent profusion upon his plate and in his glass, determined that neither variety nor taste should escape him, his customary caution equaling his diligence in despatch.

The aunts, on the other hand, had the greatest difficulty in swallowing a few mouthfuls; their hands trembled visibly as they raised them to their mouths, and they barely touched their lips with their wineglasses, pulling them away again as though they were filled with some drug or poison and they were afraid to take a sip. Their faces were of a deathly pallor, their eyes stared fixedly, their mouths were pinched and incapable of smiling or of making any answer whatsoever to Remo, who divided his attention so skilfully among his neighbours. The strength which had so far sustained them had deserted them when they sat down to the feast. Only a few moments more, and they would be going back, in their bridal dresses, alone, to Santa Maria. At that thought they longed to vanish, they longed to feel the floor open beneath their feet and swallow them up. Only a few moments more, and they would have to say good-bye to Remo, who was leaving with his wife for Genoa. He was going there to take ship, he was going to America, perhaps forever. They thanked God that they were sitting down, feeling their legs incapable of supporting them in this last trial. In their minds there was no rancour left against anyone, they no longer distinguished one

person from another; they felt their hearts like stones in their breasts, and could not hold up their heads. Teresa stared at Palle at the other end of the table, seeing him far, far away, wrapped in clouds; she clutched at him as a drowning man clutches at a chance piece of wood, even though it may be incapable of supporting him. No one had mentioned him, nothing had been heard concerning him: it was assumed that his halcyon days were over and that he would have to take up his real life again. The fellowship between the two young men had come to an end, their friendship was finished. Palle would go and look for a job at some garage or other, as a mechanic or a driver; he would have to bend his shoulders to the yoke like any other man, and accept some hard and regular work. When the neighbours asked him what he was going to do, he made no answer to anyone, appearing resigned to his fate. Her heart softened as she watched him eating, as she took up contact again with the reality from which she had felt estranged and remote. They would go back to Santa Maria with him, with Palle, who for ten years had been their nephew's inseparable companion: he was all that would remain of Remo and of those ten years. The mere sight of that far from talkative young man would illumine their existences, which seemed to be fading into darkness; they would continue to see him always, and, if he were constrained to speak, to revive memories; it would be a precious thing to him, too, to recall the happy, carefree days of his youth.

The truth of the matter was that no word had passed on the subject between Remo and Palle; nothing had been discussed, nothing had been settled, nor had the two friends given each other any hint of plans, intentions, or possibilities. Palle was not one to ask, and Remo knew that his friend would accept everything without argument; no request had been made for the despatch of papers relative to departure, for it was understood that he would be staying in Florence, and there was every reason to suppose that he would; and it was logical and right that he should be employing such diligence over his last meal at the ex-

pense of a hospitality which had for so long been the means of his rise in fortune. This young man was the saving piece of wood which still supported Teresa's head, whereas Carolina felt herself ready to collapse: her mind was overwhelmed by a painful torpor and a giddiness which made everything appear wrapped in mist, and all the sounds that came to her ears seemed to come from very far off.

They no longer looked upon the bride with bitterness or jealousy, and were no longer capable of sneering at her out of their own secret knowledge: the deadly weapon had fallen, of its own accord, from their grasp. They saw her far, far away, beneath a bell of glass; they saw everything now, as it were, through glass—even noises were isolated by a sheet of glass; it was only the chilly sheen of their own bridal dresses that caused them to tremble with cold and fear—with an intimate, personal cold and fear.

The toasts began, and some of them were charming with a faint hint of the licentious about them, praising the bride's grace and beauty (she, unable to understand, answered only: "Oh yes, all right"), and tending also to draw special attention to the lucky star that appeared to accompany the young bridegroom, their very dear friend, upon his way. But sometimes it happened that she caught a few words, and then there was the embarrassment of an explanation and also the difficulty of keeping her quiet, for—just like a child—having once caught these few words, she went on repeating them persistently and at the top of her voice.

The Materassis, too, had to clink glasses again and again with the young men whom they saw circling about them, and, suffering all the time from the sensation that their bodies were being flung about by waves, they tried to cling as tightly as they could to the figure of Palle. He too was not laughing nor joining in the general uproar, nor taking any part in the toasts except when he was forced to do so.

At a certain moment Remo left his place, glass in hand, and, going to the far end of the table, said: "Your health, Palle," hold-

ing out his glass to him. Palle took his own glass and just touched his friend's with it, without smiling; then Remo, putting his hand in his pocket, took out a small blue book and threw it on the table in front of the young man. It was his passport for America. There was a shout from all sides, the whole room exploding simultaneously: Palle was to go to America too! But Palle himself gave not the slightest outward sign of his inward feelings—neither of surprise nor pleasure nor agitation; he took up the little book from the table and put it in his pocket in exactly the way in which one might put back a box of matches one has lent one's neighbour to light a cigarette.

“Impossible to go without Palle!” said Peggy above the general din, while a group of his friends rushed upon Palle and embraced him, and then took him up and carried him in triumph round the room: “Palle’s going to America too!”

“Why, of course,” repeated Peggy, delighted beyond measure; “we couldn’t possibly go without Palle.”

From the other room, where the din had increased as the bottles were emptied, came the sound of the Settignano trumpet blasts; again the *bersagliere* song was repeated, and the trombone worked harder than ever.

Hurriedly the table was cleared and the room emptied, the chairs being placed all round the walls. Remo opened the ball with the bride, who, like some Minos dressed as an angel, contrived, with astonishing skill, to wrap eight yards of tail round and round her body. She threw herself into fox trots, tangos, and rumbas. And—since nothing is ever lacking to those for whom life is easy—even though it seemed that there was only one woman capable of dancing in that large assembly of men, there appeared, from goodness knows where, just as if they had sprung up out of the floor, ten or twelve girls who at once joined in the dancing. Just like the ancient Romans after their conquests, the guests, seeing nothing but men all round, looked sadly at each other, and then at once rushed off to seize the women, without whom it did not seem to them that they had conquered anything

at all. Remo's friends all competed for the bride, who danced as only American girls from New York know how.

The Materassis found themselves sitting in a corner, quite incapable of making out what was happening. They drew their virginal veils—considerably damaged in the confusion—close about them, as though seeking protection and concealment from them. Their poor eyes could distinguish nothing amongst the whirling crowd of dancers; they had been utterly overwhelmed in a chaos, a vortex, of voices and gestures ever since their last support had been snatched from them. So Palle, too, was leaving for America. They saw only shadows now, gesticulating shadows; an indistinct hum filled their ears, and they could not tell one person from another. Like shipwrecked mariners, they felt themselves, after a final struggle, sinking, drowning. If they had been told to rise and leave the room, they could not have done it. A few of the young men went over and spoke to them, inviting them to dance and be gay; they could not even answer, they did not understand what the young men wanted nor what they said; all they could see were laughing mouths in the mist, and in their minds rose a macabre vision of two corpses dressed as brides, dancing.

Remo, whom nothing escaped even when he had many things to attend to simultaneously, saw the state they were in and, after a few words in the ear of Peggy, who went on dancing without pause, took advantage of the steadily increasing confusion to hurry over to them, then bent down and spoke into their ears so as to be heard above the din. His closeness, his breath on their cheeks revived them as though by enchantment from their torpor and wretchedness.

"It's four o'clock already, and you'd better go home now, otherwise it'll be so late. Come along, I'll take you home."

Peggy, without leaving off dancing, called out: "Good-bye! Good-bye!" She waved a hand in the direction of the aunts. "Good-bye! Good-bye!" But they did not see her and could not answer.

The two white shadows disappeared in the thick, smoky air without anyone noticing them; they disappeared along the wall, amongst all those junketing young men who so often, at night, had sat down at their table to devour ham and sausage and golden omelettes improvised by Niobe, and glistening lettuces picked wet with dew by Palle in the darkness of the garden—Corrado, Franco, Bruno, Massimo, Renzo, Gastone, Alfredo, Sergio, Jim . . .

Once more Remo had saved the situation. No one could have given them the strength to say good-bye to him there; they would have fallen to the floor.

The car was standing ready outside, and Palle was there. They got in as though fleeing for their lives, and Remo drove at a speed ill-suited to the garb of those who sat inside, who could see, now, nothing but mists and shadows, black shadows of dancing bodies, white shadows of brides vanishing into those same mists.

Remo and his bride were to leave at five o'clock, and it was now past four; there was not a minute to lose. In a few moments they had arrived, having crossed Florence and driven along the Settignano road at a quite illegal speed.

Remo had saved the situation, and as they were tossed about and piled in a heap, first on one side, then on the other, at every bend in the road, even though that painful torpor still gripped them they felt themselves firmly bound to him. They would bid him good-bye in their own house; they had no fear there, such as they would have had amongst all those people, of being distraught and grief-stricken.

"Go and say good-bye to your mother," said Remo to Palle as they got out of the car. "I'm going up to my room to fetch something I forgot. And remember, we've only ten minutes." Going into the house, he put his top hat on the table and flew upstairs, while the aunts remained standing in the middle of the room, quite still, staring out of the window at the failing light.

Remo had gone up to his room to fetch something he had forgotten: what? It was not apparent that he had forgotten any-

thing. All his own belongings had been transported to his hotel during the previous days, and the examination made by Niobe and the aunts of every drawer and piece of furniture had been extremely minute.

He stayed there exactly ten minutes, just as he had told Palle, who had run to the institution nearby to bid farewell to his mother.

It would be interesting to speculate upon those ten minutes passed by the young man in the room which had sheltered him so lovingly for ten years. Seeing that he had nothing to do, nothing to fetch, it is obvious that he must have spent those ten minutes thinking. But it is not always easy to say what men may be thinking on certain occasions. Let us say, instead, that men of action, those who are born for a tumultuous, feverish life and whose hours are always filled with happenings, occasionally leave bare patches upon their way, small, empty spaces which others, at the right moment, may be able to fill. They, who know so well how to fill up their own time, know also that the few moments conceded, at that particular juncture, to others may be worth far more than if they had filled them themselves. And those others, showing that they appreciate the gift, will treasure it for ten years at least. For them it has a fabulous interest.

When he came down again, hurriedly, he went over to the two women, who were still standing in the same attitude: he brought them together and clasped them closely round. They allowed themselves to be taken hold of and put together and squeezed just as if they were a couple of dolls. He kissed them both, twice, on the cheeks.

“Good-bye, we’ll meet again soon; we shall be back in Florence, Peggy loves Italy so much, and Florence too, and besides . . . Well, who knows?”

There was in that “who knows?” the whole spirit of his own unplanned life; and the tone of his voice, at that moment, was one of real kindness and consideration for them.

"Life is like that," he added in conclusion; and then, at once going back in his own mind: "Isn't that so, Niobe?"

He embraced Niobe, too, and kissed her. As she stood in the doorway, she seemed as lifeless in his arms as a bundle of rags; and there she remained, in the shadow, hiding her face in her hands. Remo took his top hat from the table and ran out to the car.

"Good-bye, ladies," said Palle, thrusting his face half in at the front door and touching the peak of his cap with the tips of two fingers.

Once again they did not hear and could not answer.

Rushing out in this way—just as he had previously rushed in—Remo failed to notice that the bricklayers had pulled down the low wall in front of the house and relaid the foundations, preparatory to building a higher wall.

The two young men jumped hastily into the car, and Remo, turning the steering wheel and accelerating, for the last time, to a mad speed along the Settignano road, seemed to be saying: "One couldn't have done anything better, or anything more." And perhaps he was right.

And the two women, after he had clasped and kissed them, collapsed into the two chairs beside their embroidery frames. There they remained, inert, rigid, without shedding a tear, staring in front of them into the void with unseeing eyes. From that moment, it was only by looking backward that they would be enabled to live. From the shadow of the doorway, where she stood with her face in her hands, came the noise of Niobe's occasional, animal-like sobs: it was the only sound.

Then at last they made up their minds to rise, and to go, very, very slowly, moving like automata, upstairs to their room and, at last, to undress, to set themselves free, to rest after a day which had been altogether too much for their strength. The long white trains—like mere sloughed-off skins, now—trailed behind the two figures in the half-darkness of the staircase: they vanished like ghosts.

Once in their room, leaning against the bed, each on her own side, they felt they had not the strength to take those dresses off; they felt their bodies had turned to wood and that the dresses had become like varnish upon them, like white paint; they touched them lightly, they stroked them gently with their fingers, knowing well that they could not be rid of them; they felt themselves to be two lifeless objects of which the dresses formed part. They threw themselves, just as they were, upon the bed. It was almost dark. Through the window could be seen, on the church roof and on the little campanile, the small, twinkling fires of the illuminations that crowned the wedding day.

Buried Alive

PASTACALDI, the butcher at Ponte a Mensola who had taken up the first mortgage upon it, had now become the owner of the house property; and the owner of the farm . . . guess who had become the owner of the farm: why, Fellino, none other than Fellino, the Materassis' tenant farmer.

On the line where the low wall had been, with its not very imposing vases, in front of the house, there was now a wall nearly ten feet high which, starting from the iron gate and running right along, formed a narrow passage in front of the house, shutting it in completely and taking away all light and air from the ground floor, which now, with its rusty gratings, really looked like a convent, not to say a prison.

The little door leading from the kitchen into the fields at the back had also been walled up.

Teresa and Carolina were never to be seen now, except for half an hour on Sundays when they went to hear early Mass. They hurried along, muffled up, with heads lowered, or looking ostentatiously straight in front of them, pretending not to see and not to know anyone, so as not to be compelled to greet their old tenants, who stared haughtily at them now that they were ruined.

But the latter did not spare them a significant cough or an in-

solent titter to make their presence felt, so that the sisters should have no doubts about the interest they took in them, in their affairs and misfortunes and distresses; and a few of them, from long-standing spite, deliberately and defiantly laughed at them in a brazen, indecent, offensive manner. They aimed all sorts of rude remarks in their direction, with loud comments upon what had happened to them and upon their present wretched state, now that no one was afraid of them (since they no longer owned anything), and now that they were no longer an object of admiration or envy for anyone, but rather of pity. This they did especially at night, under their bedroom window when they were trying to sleep, so that the poor creatures should hear them; and they had been completely successful in making them shudder beneath the bedcovers, and then, after a rush of anger, stop their ears for shame, and commit themselves into God's hands.

But there was worse than that: some filthy rascal, whose name was never found out, had the effrontery to relieve himself in their gateway, right in the middle where people had to pass, at the same time—which was even worse—dirtying the bars of the gate in an obscene way so as to make the affront more insulting. Poor Niobe, that morning, had had to wash the paving stones and the gate itself with the greatest care—which she did with Christian humility and resignation, and without even the heart to hurl abuse at whoever it was who had committed such an indecency; she had simply looked up and asked God to put a stop to such useless wickedness. And when she went back into the house, hanging her head, humiliated and disgusted, she had muttered to herself: "Well, well, it looks like women's work to me." It is not for us to investigate into the astrological interpretations of Niobe.

They had sneered at them and insulted them in every possible way. And not so much on account of the enjoyment they had allowed to others or the enjoyment they were supposed to have had themselves, but, above all, because they had come down in

the world, because they were defeated, and as a revenge for the time when they had been exalted and triumphant.

No possible pretext could summon them to the gate, no enticement could bring them to the window of their room, which remained always closed. Only on Sunday mornings could they be seen, hurrying to early Mass, and this was a trial to them; they would have liked never to be seen again by any living soul, but a deep-rooted moral principle prevented them from abandoning this spiritual duty, which, in spite of the torment involved, they found elevating.

When they went out they would walk quickly through the greyness of the winter morning, keeping very close together, and they remained on their knees during the whole time of the Mass, praying with their faces buried in their hands or gazing imploringly at the altar; this was the place where, a few months before, in their splendid dresses of white silk, with their veils and their orange blossom, they had defied the world on their two golden chairs covered with blue damask.

With this paralysis upon them they seemed to be expiating that same fault, to be asking pardon for it. In their workroom they would wander vaguely from table to table, from one piece of furniture to another, as though arranging things or looking for something, but with their thoughts elsewhere. From the big cupboard or the chest of drawers they would pull out pieces of material which, after unfolding them and appraising them with a cold eye, they would fold up again and then put back with a complete lack of interest. Ribbons, pieces of silk twist, bits of lace; they would make them into little tangled heaps. They searched, knowing there was nothing to find. They might have been fumbling through the drawers of some impoverished dead member of the family, whose castoff belongings are looked through as a mere formality, with respect and detachment and a vague repugnance, without the slightest interest and with the knowledge, beforehand, that nothing either important or agreeable will be found among them.

It was obvious that what they were doing was not dictated by necessity, nor did it even appear to have any meaning.

Sometimes they would stop in the middle of this performance and gaze desolately round that room which they had always felt to be filled to overflowing with their own personalities, but which now had become empty, empty and uselessly large. They would sit down, finding no reasonable position for their heads. Plunging one finger, or several fingers, into their hair, they would scratch their heads, and then sit stock-still, their hands lying dead on their aprons.

Niobe would appear at the door, her arms hanging limp at her sides—those arms which, between one job and another, used to rest, active and ready, on her hips, but which now hung down inert.

To look at them thus, they seemed like three half lemons which had been squeezed dry and thrown on to the rubbish heap.

The houses were sold; the farm was sold; their savings were exhausted to the last penny; their last client had vanished.

Giselda had made various expeditions to Florence with small objects of gold or silver, and even with objects of domestic use, on which she had raised a few lire.

Now there was nothing left to sell except the furniture and those walls to which they felt themselves clinging like oysters. Once detached from them—if indeed they ever could be unstuck—they knew that only the dreariest pauperism awaited them; but they could not even think of such a thing, feeling that they would fall dead in the gateway rather than pass through it.

Thirty years before, on the death of their father, the family affairs had not been in so hopelessly gloomy a state as they were now: there had been many debts to pay, but the houses and the farm were no more than mortgaged, and they were young, and filled with the ardour and faith to redeem them, and ambitious to see the triumph of their own feverish, superabounding energy. And work flowed in from every side, so that they were continually having to refuse it.

Now, whichever way they turned, they saw nothing but dust and ashes, dust and ashes everywhere. . . . Beyond the dust and ashes were remote, intangible ghosts—those carriages, with horses pawing the ground, those glossy motorcars which once had been drawn to their door by some mysterious attraction, which had been their glory and their pride, and which had turned that humble village house, for ten, twenty, thirty years, into a sanctuary of labour and skill; and such it had been considered by all. Now they passed swiftly, far away, along other roads; and thought could scarcely manage to distinguish or to follow them.

This memory angered them, turned them harsh and bitter. All those luxurious women whom they had served loyally and passionately for forty years had gradually deserted them, because they were old, because their worn-out eyes were no longer able to perform miracles, because in recent years work had not been their only thought, their only reason for existence, because they were tired and distracted by life's vicissitudes. Those selfish women had come there merely to take from them, to make use of the wonders they produced and which they themselves could acquire without sacrifice because they were rich: now that they could no longer produce those wonders, they left them to die of hunger. They would have sudden outbursts of indignation and hatred against them, and from time to time they would prick up their ears and listen, but in vain. They were but ghosts, appearing and disappearing beyond the dust and ashes. And above all else, like the tolling of a funeral bell, came the echo of a voice, clutching at the throat, tearing the heart: "Zi' Tè, Zi' Cà." But little by little this sharp agony softened into sweetness, wetting their eyelashes, making them sigh deeply.

They had seen Niobe coming back home with half a loaf of bread hidden in her apron, with a few green vegetables, clutching a few eggs jealously to her breast for fear of breaking them, or bravely carrying a bundle of sticks which she had gone to collect in the woods at Vincigliata. There was no more coal in the house.

Their former tenants relished, with ill-concealed joy, the various stages of their gradual descent, just as once upon a time they had followed them, unwillingly, in their rise to fortune.

Beneath the wall that had been raised in front of their windows, in that little strip of ground which lay open to the full south and was protected from the north wind, the old lime trees that their eyes had seen when they first saw the light had been cut down by Fellino, the blows of hatchet and axe echoing in their hearts as though the wood were being cut for their own coffins: he was now preparing the soil for the early crops of vegetables—tender peas and little radishes and the first small pumpkins—and went on and on manuring it to make it fertile. The two unfortunate women, so haughty, so fastidious when they had owned the farm, now had to keep all the windows closed so as not to smell the stink; but, as though it were a punishment which by some supreme decree they could not escape, they smelt it just the same because it came in through every crack.

Not for anything in the world, however, would they have risen against the new, legitimate proprietor, whom they bitterly detested. And, rather than ask either him or their old tenants for so much as a piece of bread, they would have died of starvation.

They were buried alive; they had no right to speak.

They were in this state of extreme depression one morning, and in a mood of fruitless expectation, and, after many privations and many shifts on the part of Niobe, there was nothing to eat in the house.

The two mistresses looked at the servant enquiringly, in the way that a sick child looks at its mother, unable to believe that she, for all her omnipotence, cannot do anything to make it well again: not that its faith in her is shaken, but it wonders why she does not take action.

And the servant, mortified, humiliated, deeply troubled, looked back at her mistresses with an encouraging gentleness, just like the mother who knows that at all costs, if it be the last thing in her

power, she must conceal her own powerlessness so as not to discourage the child further.

Teresa gazed at Niobe, watching for a word from her lips, unable to understand why it did not come of its own accord, why, in such circumstances, it had not already been uttered. She was unable to understand, but she was still far from doubting the generosity of Niobe's heart and her complete devotion: she was seeking a reason.

She made a difficult, painful effort, and broke the ice: "Niobe, listen, Niobe . . . come over here."

Foreseeing what was coming from her mistress's lips, the servant made no sign of moving towards her, embarrassed by the answer she would have to give. And Teresa's voice trembled at having to declare so openly the sad reality of her own circumstances.

"You know, Niobe, this is a bad time for us; we haven't any work, as you see, but we'll get work again, I'm sure of that; we'll go to Florence, we'll go and see our old clients and ask for their custom again, and we'll offer them very easy terms, because we'll be content with earning less now . . . enough to live on, of course . . . But at the present moment we don't know how to manage. Excuse me if I ask a favour of you; I do it because in the first place I'm quite sure of the goodness of your heart, but above all because I'm certain of being able to repay all you give me. At the present moment I don't see who we can turn to except you. . . . You see what we've come to. . . ."

Courageous, frank, and self-confident as she was, she did not dare meet her servant's eye; she twisted her hands and hung her head all the time she was speaking. As for the servant, she, poor thing, bent her head lower and lower, like a guilty person listening to a just reproof. And Carolina, too, hung her head at this moment of deepest humiliation.

In the midst of all their misfortunes and struggles they had always had one immense force to sustain them—the thought of their wonder-working hands, an unconquerable thought which

no one could take from them. Now that force was failing them: their hands hung lifeless against their bodies, and they no longer knew even how to hold them. This was the reality to which they could not submit; the rest they could accept.

Lacking the courage to move forward one single step, and having no breath to utter a syllable in reply, the old servant, like Christ submitting to be crucified, did not raise her head but opened her arms wide, in acceptance of her cross.

A flash, a gleam of comprehension, lit up Teresa's mind, and she started back, raising her head and crying: "You gave them to *him*, you've nothing left . . ."

She did not utter the rest of her thought, which died upon her lips: "And I was wondering why you hadn't already offered to help me. . . ."

She seemed to lose herself in this thought, then, recovering herself, went on, speaking gently and softly, a vague, almost invisible smile on her lips: "So you've been left . . . you've been left without a penny too, poor Niobe. . . . That's why you didn't say anything. . . . And I who couldn't understand . . . What a fool I was!"

She looked round in a dreamy, desolate way, then passed her hand twice across her forehead just as she used to do when, exhausted by hard work, she raised her head for a few seconds to regain her feeling of self-control. Then she sat down.

Carolina was still standing with her head bent and her hands in her apron, as though she were right outside the scene; she gave no sign of comprehension.

But now Niobe very slowly approached; she went and stood between the two sisters, now that they knew the truth, and, to feel closer to them, to speak with greater effect, she sat down between them.

"You know quite well that I hardly spent anything of my wages; I had ten thousand lire in the Post Office Savings Bank, and you know I used to go every now and then and pay in my money—you remember? I took the whole of my wages there, you

might say—all except a very little that I used to keep to make myself a few underclothes or buy myself a pair of shoes or an apron, and so as not to be without a few pennies in my pocket. The first five thousand I gave him six years ago, to get his motor bike.”

“Ah!”

“Ah!”

The sisters awoke simultaneously from their torpor.

“Ah! So it was you who gave it him.”

“You see, you wouldn’t give in, you were determined to go on saying no, no, no, right to the very end. . . . So what was I to do?”

Teresa looked at Carolina with a gleam of light in her eyes, and Carolina, as she looked back at her sister, appeared revived, trembling with emotion.

“We always thought it was some loose woman who gave him the money.”

“So it was you who gave it him!”

“Yes, five thousand lire.”

“But the machine cost ten thousand.”

“The rest he was supposed to pay by small instalments, and he didn’t ask me for any more that time. And two years later, you’ll remember, he sold it to buy his first motorcar.”

“Just what I told you, that boy would have died rather than take money from women.”

As they went on talking, a new vigour seemed to fill all three of them; they drew up their chairs and sat close together.

“And the other five thousand, I had to give him that when he came back unexpectedly from Viareggio two years ago. He told me it was for some affair on which the whole of his future depended, an affair which would put him in a good position at once. You see . . . I didn’t want to have any regrets on my conscience—poor young man. . . . And then, for many years, I never paid in anything to the Post Office—how could I? There were all sorts of expenses; what we needed was a mint in the cellar, not

just my little trifles, so as to be able to draw money as you go and draw wine from a cask."

"So it was you who paid for the motor bicycle!"

"And it never occurred to me . . . I made all sorts of guesses . . . It was a thing that upset me very much, it really was, and when the question of the new car came up I hadn't the strength to resist."

The affair of the motor bicycle had been the only obscure point in their life with their nephew, and now it was cleared up as though by enchantment. Teresa sighed with relief over this doubt that had never been allayed. The motor bicycle which the handsome eighteen-year-old boy had so calmly brought home had remained a dark cloud on their horizon, but now they sighed with relief beneath a sky radiant with sunshine.

"With the motorcar too, we were so afraid he'd get that woman up there, that Lenin countess, to give it to him."

"Yes," answered Niobe, finding her natural tone of voice again, "yes, of course . . . But you don't know these women; the Countess liked to take, not to give, but the boy was cleverer than she was, and he managed very well: he liked his goods fresh, he did, not old and flabby, in spite of all the fuss she made of him."

"What a slut!"

"There was no mistaking what *she* was."

"But he saw at once that what the Countess was looking for was a nice young simpleton."

"Then why did he drag her up and down in front of the door for hours at a time?"

"Ah well . . . no doubt he had his reasons."

"It isn't a very nice thing for a decent young man's relations to see him with a scandalous old woman like that; and that was why I made up my mind to cut it short and buy the car for him."

"Then there were so many little expenses, you see. Anyone who goes about needs all sorts of little things, so as not to be outdone by others."

Gradually, as she spoke, the two sisters felt life coming back to

them; and gradually Niobe reassumed her composed, smiling expression.

“Another thing . . . Our household sheets are so coarse—they’re all right for people like us, who go to bed with nightdresses on; and if *he* had slept in a nightshirt I wouldn’t have said anything, but with nothing on, like that . . . it was impossible. So I bought him some good linen sheets, light and cool; I just couldn’t bear to think of him in those coarse countrified sheets, and *he* hadn’t any itch that needed scratching, him with a skin like ivory. And how pleased he was when he noticed them! Of course *he* wouldn’t have breathed a word, he never thought of such a thing; it was I who saw that the thing just wouldn’t do. Why, let’s be honest about it—it wasn’t right. . . .”

The two sisters gazed at her spellbound, hanging from her lips, and even though midday had struck while they were talking they didn’t notice it. They were unaware of time, or of any sign of hunger.

“He was so kindhearted, and how he loved things of fine quality, how he showed he understood and appreciated them! He was certainly born to be a gentleman. Now and again he gave me photographs; he even sent me some from Viareggio.”

“Ah, did he really, to you too? And why didn’t you show them to us?”

“I knew you had plenty of them. . . .”

It was Remo’s custom, when he was away, to send snapshots to his aunts, and he had sent Niobe a few too, or had given them to her directly. But whereas the aunts had shown theirs to everyone, even to the point of wearisomeness, Niobe had kept hers hidden. And she seemed now to be concealing something, and smiled in a knowing sort of way.

“Anyhow, I’ve got them in my chest of drawers; I can go and fetch them.”

She came back in a few moments with the photographs, and they looked through them together, with steadily increasing curiosity. Carolina, unable to restrain herself, went up to her room

to fetch her own pictures—at least thirty of them—so as to compare them with Niobe's, of which there were not more than ten in all. They spread them out on the table. Each one recalled an event, a place, a particular day or moment. The conversation grew extremely animated, punctuated by exclamations and bursts of laughter, like the conversations of happier times—just as if the painful problems which immersed them had been solved. To talk of their nephew, to examine his figure in these snapshots, did their hearts good and cleared their minds, as though he were still there in person or were on the point of appearing for lunch at any moment. The first thing that leapt to their minds as they looked through all the pictures was that, while in the ones belonging to the aunts Remo was always perfectly dressed, and often wearing a hat, in Niobe's he was in bathing or rowing costume, in vest and shorts, in a group with other oarsmen or with friends, or even with young ladies; or on a raft with Palle, or sitting on a rock. The two sisters could not have enough of looking at them, making comparisons with their own, but absorbed by the new ones whose existence they had never suspected, throwing out exclamations of wonder at the powerfulness and beauty of his shoulders, of his legs, and at the respective proportions of his body and head, in which sheer strength never predominated over lordly elegance and harmony.

“But why didn't you show them to us?”

“Well . . .”

Niobe hesitated; it was evident that she was hiding something, and as she looked at her mistresses she was on the point of exploding with laughter.

“I've got another one, as a matter of fact . . . if you want to see it. . . .”

“Where is it?”

She seemed to be bashful about something, or anxious to pull the thread of their curiosity even tighter. She was holding one hand under her apron.

“Come along, let's see it.”

“Show it to us—come on.”

“Why don’t you want to show it?”

“Why haven’t you shown it to us already?”

“What harm is there in it?”

She withdrew her hand and placed a much larger photograph than the others on the table.

“He sent this one in an envelope.”

In this one, considerably larger than a post card, Remo was alone and naked except for a pair of brief and rather scanty bathing drawers, so that the full effect of his extremely beautiful body was displayed in all its splendour. The photograph had been taken at the water’s edge. The young man was standing with head erect, looking into the sun, whose brilliant light did not, however, disturb the serenity of his face, but produced a slight frown, a faintly angry expression that suited him extremely well. Behind him, for background, was the sea.

Teresa was dazzled, as though she herself were staring into the sun. As for Carolina, after one look which seemed to swallow up the picture, she leapt to her feet as if to make her escape, uttered a cry, and then sank back into her chair.

They required some minutes to collect themselves before they could face that piece of paper again.

“That’s just like him, there’s no doubt about it, just exactly like him,” said Niobe, half dreaming, half awake, while her mistresses, profoundly agitated, were gazing at the picture.

They turned towards her.

“Of course *I* knew he had a figure like that.”

They gazed at her even more eagerly.

“Well, you see, I had to go into his room three or four times every morning, at the time when he was having his bath and to take him his breakfast. And then—why, when he undressed, you hadn’t time to run out of the room, not even to turn round—not even to say ‘amen’—so, even if you didn’t want to, you couldn’t help seeing. There he’d be, all in a flash, just as God made him; I don’t know how he did it—but there’s no denying,

God made a proper good job of him, He did indeed," she concluded, appealing to the photograph.

While Carolina's imagination wandered amongst these descriptions, Teresa sat facing the servant with a smile upon her face that rose from her very heart in an impetuous flood of pure cheerfulness such as she had not felt for a long time.

More and more astounded, the two sisters went on looking at the photographs, pausing first at one, then at another. They passed from Niobe's to their own and then quickly back to the others, in which the young man was shown in bathing or rowing costume; and then to the last and largest, which displayed his nudity with fascinating clearness. There their examination came to an end, and then began all over again.

"And why didn't you show them to us before?"

"Well . . . I hardly know myself—how shall I explain? Perhaps because—I confess—I liked them too much . . . and then I thought you would be shocked, even though there's no harm in them—what harm could there be? But I know you're so very shy about certain things, so very particular. And then I saw that the ones he sent to you were different from mine. . . ."

At this point they heard a noise on the stairs: Giselda was coming down. So busy had they been turning over and commenting upon the photographs that it was already past one o'clock, the time at which they sat down to their meal.

It must be pointed out that Giselda, even though her sisters had made no confession to her nor given her any precise statement, had formed an exact idea of the desperate circumstances in which they were struggling, owing to the loss of the whole of their fortune; especially since their meals, for more than a month now, had consisted of things on credit or loan, begged or borrowed by Niobe in the neighbourhood—not the immediate neighbourhood, however, because, as I have already said, her mistresses refused to accept any kind of favour that might come from those who had been their tenants or subordinates, whom they had once helped and who were now in a position to help them.

Feeling that the state of affairs was rapidly growing worse, Giselda was now coming downstairs with noble, generous intentions, coming to offer herself, her very self, to help her sisters who were grown old and poor; and even though she held them to be responsible for her own ruin, she felt that hatred and recrimination were now useless, and that the moment had come to act without discussion. She was fifteen years younger and not, like them, worn out with hard work, and in her heart, fundamentally noble and embittered only by adversity, she felt a duty and an urgent need to repay—in part, anyhow—by her own concern and participation, the benefits received from them over so many years; she forgot, at that moment, how much harshness and unpleasantness there had been in their life together. Her face was lit up by an unusual peacefulness, by a look of composure, almost of sweetness, and she was ready to talk quietly, to make plans, to give and accept advice, so as to find some solution to an intolerable state of affairs. But at the picture which met her eyes as she came into the room, as she saw the three women blissfully absorbed in the contemplation of the photographs that covered the table, she became violently agitated and a blaze of anger and contempt seemed to scorch her brain, throwing her into a state of delirium and turning upside down all her former feelings: it was an emotion beyond her control, too powerful for her reason. “After all that has happened, after this hopeless catastrophe which is entirely due to their own unforgivable weakness, and which has reduced them from prosperity to absolute indigence, after all these days of want and almost of starvation, with the fire gone out, the storeroom empty, and not a halfpenny in their pockets, those three idiots sit gazing ecstatically at photographs of the scoundrel who has so coolly brought them to this pitch of disaster, far more cheerful, round that table, than if they were sitting at a sumptuous dinner. . . .”

“What’s going on?” she said through clenched teeth, white with rage.

The three women, hearing themselves attacked by that hard, cruel voice, flung up their heads to strike back.

“What are you doing, I should like to know?”

“We’re doing just as we please.”

“So we have to account for our actions to *you*, now, do we?”

“But isn’t it lunch time?”

They looked at each other beneath that dagger-like glance. They had forgotten the time, they had forgotten their hunger; one o’clock had struck, and they did not know how to answer her. The photographs had had the power to transport them outside reality, into a happy dream from which they would have preferred not to be awakened. The harsh voice of their sister recalled them to the full wretchedness of the truth. They looked at each other, conscious of a rising flood of hatred against her for thus sitting in judgment upon them.

“We’re not hungry,” said Teresa in a cool, ironical, almost gay, tone.

“We’re not hungry,” echoed Carolina in an affected voice.

“But I am.”

“Look after yourself, then.”

Giselda did not know what answer to make, nor how to begin; she had altogether too many things to say, so that her throat felt blocked and more liable to explode than to utter coherent words.

“Look after myself . . . look after myself . . . Yes, certainly I’ll look after myself, but just myself, only myself, mind you—and it won’t be here, it certainly won’t be here, where there isn’t so much as a crust to give to a dog. . . . Of course I’ll look after myself, indeed I will, and you’ll soon see how I’ll do it, you can be sure of that. . . .” She spoke by fits and starts, jerkily and breathlessly. “I’ll take a place as a servant, which is just what I’ve always been here to you fine ladies”—she bowed to them in mockery—“to you fine ladies and your worthy nephew”—she gave another very quick bow, blazing with hatred—“but at least I shall get something to eat, and wages at the end of the month. The only reward for work here is the beauty of the two mistresses.” She smiled

undisguisedly and made a sweeping bow. "To be a servant and get nothing at all—except sour looks—and to go hungry into the bargain—no, no, my darlings, oh no, you must find someone else to wipe your noses for you; I'm going away, so help me God! I ought to have done so before, and then I shouldn't have found myself in this mess—pooh!" She looked as if she were about to throw herself upon her sisters and bite them, but her action resolved itself into a cry of disgust. "Pooh!" she repeated, spewing out her spite upon them.

The three women, stretching out towards her, seemed on the point of hurling themselves at her and striking her, but a violent trembling held them back, their arms waving hysterically.

"Get out!"

"Get out!"

"Get out!"

No other words could they find as they waved their arms at her to drive her away.

"Get out!"

"Get out!"

Instead of increasing her fury, their rage and defiance caused Giselda to adopt a sarcastic tone, venomous and teasing; and instead of retracting her words, she showed herself ready to yield to the assault of their demands.

"Certainly I'm going away, of course I am, there's no need for you to go on asking me; the fine ladies shall be left in peace. They're quite right to send me away, because they don't need a housemaid any more, and even a housemaid wants to fill her belly at midday—she needs to, in fact—and now the ladies have empty bellies too, even though it's one or two o'clock."

"Get out of our house!"

"Get out!"

"Go away!"

They had almost reached the point of sinking their teeth into each other when Giselda, in a towering rage, swept out of the room and up the stairs like a hurricane.

The others were left trembling, palpitating with fury, at white heat, while from above, from Giselda's room, came the sound of exasperated footsteps going from one side of the room to the other, of objects being moved, chairs overturned, drawers being noisily opened and shut.

Their anger gradually cooled after their viperish sister left them, and the three women looked at each other, still panting irregularly, taking deep breaths, smoothing away the dishevelled hair at the backs of their necks and on their foreheads.

Then they glanced down at the photographs in an aimless sort of way, until finally the one of Remo naked on the beach at Viareggio, with the sun in his face and the sea behind him, succeeded in recalling them to themselves; or rather, it was they who now succeeded, after that violent interval, in looking at it boldly, without the natural timidity of which Niobe had spoken and which had overcome them when they had first caught sight of it.

“But why didn't you show them to us before?”

Absorbed in the complications of the situation, which seemed tangled beyond hope, the servant scarcely smiled.

They passed half an hour in this way, in a confused and uncomfortable silence, in prolonged, vexatious suspense, ears strained to catch every sound from overhead, yet unwilling to betray their preoccupation. It was the kind of silence that precedes some grave, inevitable event, an event only partially foreseen; and then at last they heard a great clatter again on the stairs. Giselda came rushing down with her coat and hat on; in one hand she carried a suitcase, in the other a big bundle tied up with rope.

As she crossed the room she was in such a state of tumult that her anger made her start and stumble, and she never even turned towards the three women; it was as if she had not seen them. But when she reached the door, assailed by a fresh gust of feeling that she could not restrain, she put down her suitcase on the floor, like someone who has forgotten something and turns hastily back; then whirled round and took three steps, as though she were going to throw herself upon them. “Boobies!” she cried.

The mountain had given birth to a mouse. Her sudden change of mind at the door, and the onset that followed it, had given no reason to expect that they would be crowned by so modest an invective. But since Niobe, seeing this onset, had thrown herself forward with clenched fists to defend her mistresses: "Strumpet! . . . Beast!" she threw into her face, turning back twice towards her. Then she took up her suitcase and fled.

They pursued her right into the street, yelling after her:

"Get out!"

"Go away!"

"Get away with you!"

"Out of our house!"

"High time, too, my God!" shouted Niobe fiercely.

"Get out!"

Their shouts, first from inside, then outside the door, had collected a considerable number of people, anxious to know and to see what was going on in that house which had now become the house of surprises. But Niobe, banging the gate violently behind the departing woman, shouted to her mistresses: "Come and hold on here, hang on tight! Do please come and hang on here!"—imploring them to keep the gate closed with their hands while she herself prepared to run into the house and fetch the key.

The two sisters clung to the gate and kept it so firmly closed that four men could not have torn them away from it. They did not really know why they were clasping those bars so tightly; their nervous excitement had reached the point of paroxysm, and unconsciously they were venting its violence upon those bits of iron; while in the meantime Niobe had to run to fetch the key, and they themselves were making all kinds of faces and grimaces at the people gathering outside, who, motionless and breathless, stood watching them, keeping at a distance, frightened, humiliated, just as though they were two wild beasts trying to break out of their cage and devour them.

The children clung to their mothers' skirts.

“Do we owe you some money, then?”

“What is it you’re after?”

“What d’you want, I should like to know?”

“Very inquisitive, aren’t you?”

“Haven’t you ever seen us before? Have a good look, then.”

“What is there to look at?”

“Mind your own business.”

“Why not keep a better eye on your own daughters?”

“Chatterers!”

“Gossips!”

“Go and sweep in front of your own door; there’s plenty of muck *there*.”

“Shut your gaping mouth!”

“Dirty beasts!”

“Nasty brutes!”

“You can’t say anything against *us*, we’re respectable women. Pity there aren’t lots more like us. There ought to be two in every house, that there ought. . . . Hum!”

Teresa gave a grunt and then pretended to spit at the assembled crowd, which was steadily increasing, while Carolina, extending her hand through the bars of the gate, made a long nose at them, immediately grasping the bars again. More and more people arrived; they kept at a respectful distance, but were frenziedly anxious to see.

“All right, you can look at us, yes, have a good look; you don’t often see women like us, because the mould was broken after we were made, and the women of this village are nothing but a herd of sows.”

No one dared breathe or move a finger.

“Donkey-faces!”

And it was indeed true that astonishment had lengthened their faces to the point of removing all human sensibility from them.

Niobe came running back, but, instead of the key, which had probably not existed for at least half a century, she brought with her a chain and a padlock.

With difficulty she pulled away her two mistresses, who were clinging to the gate like maddened snakes, still shouting and screaming. Then she twisted the chain four or five times round the middle bars, inserted the padlock, and turned the key, flinging, as she did so, a last word at the spectators:

“Swine!”

She flung at them, at the same time, a supremely plebeian, supremely indelicate gesture; then she started urging the two sisters in the direction of the house.

They shut themselves in, banging the door with such violence that you might have expected every one of the panes of glass to fall out. Then, sighing with relief, they started striding up and down their room, in every direction, as though they felt themselves in complete possession of it in a way they had never felt until that stormy moment. “Ah! Ah! Now, at last! Ah! Oh!” They wandered freely about, dilating themselves and dilating their lungs at the same time. “Ah! Oh!”

They had lost everything, they had not even anything to eat, but they were conscious of a sense of liberation now that they were freed from the inquisitorial presence of the hostile witness, the cruel judge; the enemy, the stranger. They felt for the first time that they were truly mistresses in their own house. “Ah! Oh!”

And now, as though after a shipwreck, ecstatic but stupefied, their eyes still wide with terror, leaning their heads on their hands, the sisters were again sitting round the table upon which were spread the snapshots of Remo in so many different clothes and so many different poses. The one on the seashore at Viareggio stood out above all the rest. Over their staring eyes there was no flicker of an eyelid; they gazed at a fixed point, unseeing, and the moment of collapse was imminent.

Niobe was the hero who knows no repose because he knows no fatigue. When she came back into the house she stood in her usual place, framed in the doorway, and contemplated her mistresses with a gleam of light in her eyes—of that vivid light which never

left them even in moments of desperation. She contemplated them with a growing confidence which was reflected increasingly in her eyes like the light of the sun. She was filled with a longing to speak; it was obvious that the words were scorching her lips and that she could no longer hold them back.

After a few moments of this pregnant silence Carolina, who had sat staring fixedly at the table, murmured, in a voice like a sigh, as if she were recovering from the effects of a narcotic: "Why didn't you show them to us before?"

"Well, well . . ." answered Niobe, closely absorbed in her own thought, and speaking merely in order to give an answer of some kind. "Really, I hardly know, myself. . . ."

"This one is the biggest of all."

"Yes."

"We haven't any big picture of Remo, only these snapshots."

She spoke in an exhausted, detached, remote, gentle sort of way.

"Well, you could get enlargements made from the little ones," Niobe added, to conclude a subject in which she was not interested.

"That's true, yes, you're right," murmured Carolina, her voice fading away.

Teresa was following the conversation and looking at the photographs with an equal lack of interest, being absorbed in her own oppressive, tormenting thoughts, until at last she made an effort and broke in: "What's the time, I should like to know?"

"Almost three," replied Niobe, without adding anything further.

The sisters looked at each other in bewilderment. Their minds were possessed by a feeling of fear, by a growing sense of despair at the idea that they had had nothing to eat and that there was nothing to eat in the house, even though they had not the slightest sensation of hunger. Niobe realized that this was exactly the right moment for her to intervene and play her trump card, to give utterance from where she stood, in the shadow of the doorway,

to those words that were shining in her eyes like jewels—words from which she expected so encouraging a result.

“Listen to me now,” she began, going up to Teresa, “listen to me, there’s something I want to tell you. . . . I hadn’t wanted to tell you till today, but now I can’t help it. You can do what you like about it, of course; but I’m sure you won’t want to scold me, even if I’ve done the wrong thing.”

Teresa observed her with awakening interest, while Carolina nodded feebly at the words of this woman whose faith had remained unshaken.

“Rosina’s daughter, at Bucce, is getting married in April. They’ve made the trousseau, they’ve made it all themselves, at home, but it seems that, to make it quite complete, she’d like to have at any rate half a dozen fine chemises, really smart ones, and perhaps a few other little things too, if it could be managed. She’s marrying a well-to-do man—he’s the owner of a bakery in Florence—and they fell in love when she went to work at a dressmaker’s nearby; so she’s getting into a go-ahead sort of family, and she wants to keep her own end up—quite right, too—she doesn’t want just to be a nobody, she’s got some money put aside. I told her I’d see what I could do about it, but that she mustn’t count on me. ‘I’ll try and see if anything can be done,’ I said. They’re peasants, we know that, but after all, their money’s worth just as much as ladies’ money. Of course you don’t work for peasant women, I told Rosina that. ‘No, my girl,’ I said, ‘I can’t tell you anything at all about it, you know just as well as I do who their clients are and what kind of work my mistresses do; it’s stuff for grand ladies, not for workingwomen.’ It’s she who’s been giving me eggs and bread, and she gave me a flask of wine, too, and a bottle of oil—but without any obligation, of course; we’ll do the same for her another time. Every time I go there she says to me: ‘What about it?’ And I say to her: ‘Well, my child, what about it?’ I have to make some sort of an answer, you see. I say that because I have to; I know they’re well-to-do sort of people, and they would even pay in advance.”

At first Teresa wrinkled her brow at this unexpected speech, and Carolina immediately started wriggling in the way she always did when she wanted to escape from some unpleasant kind of trap that she felt was closing round her; but after these hesitations, so natural and so justifiable, Teresa threw back her head with all her former pride as a skilled craftswoman.

"Go on then, go, Niobe, go to Rosina and tell her we'll make the chemises; tell her we'll make the rest, too, we'll make everything she wants."

Unwilling to risk a change of mind or a withdrawal of their free consent, Niobe fled like a child who at last holds some long-desired object in its hands, and the sisters heard her unchaining and opening the gate almost before they had finished saying yes.

They followed her, in thought, as she went along the main road and then by a side road to the farmhouse known as "Bucce"—its land stretched almost to Ponte a Mensola, along the stream; and they could almost hear her giving her excited answer, panting with emotion.

"Here she is," said Niobe, presenting the peasant woman to the sisters, "here she is." And while they embarked on a discussion, while they hunted out and looked through patterns, models, and fashion books, sounds of life were already coming from the kitchen upon which, gradually, the silence of death had been descending. And by the time Rosina left, having settled with the Materassis what was to be done, Niobe appeared, smiling, and summoned them to table, where a fine omelette with sausages awaited them.

The news spread with all the rapidity of such unheard-of happenings: the Materassis were making chemises for the Bucce daughter. Women and girls of all ages began swarming like ants round the house, debating in low voices, buzzing, chirping, speculating about colours and patterns and embroideries, about terms, and about how these women, accustomed as they were to dealing with grand ladies, would welcome their new client. Rosina from Bucce, Amelia from Gozzo, Regina from Mezzanotte, Luisina

from Stoppa, Maria from Il Mela, Assuntina from Fringuello, Cesira from La Casanova, Armida from Gocciolina, Margherita from Montesole, others from Pantera, Bullegia, Fracassa—a veritable procession began, gradually, to wend its way from the Bucce farmhouse—at first timidly and then more boldly—towards the house of the Materassis. All the mothers with daughters about to be married, all the daughters who had to get their trousseaux ready. Teresa and Carolina were assailed, besieged. One would have thought that all these women, like an army skilfully concealed by a clever general, had been merely awaiting a signal in order to launch their attack. Nor must it be imagined that they were content with work in conformity with their own humble condition—not at all; they wanted it to be in every possible way like the work done for the ladies—or at any rate it must give that illusion. This was their triumph and their greatest pleasure: it was a point of honour. They insisted that each article must bear the label, “Materassi Sisters,” just like their other work, and that invoices must be headed with their proper official names, not with the appellations by which they were universally known, such as Bucce, Gozzo, Cicche, Filze, Stoppa, or Mezzanotte, but: “To Signora Rosa Cerotti,” “To Signora Lucrezia Porcinai,” “To Signora Regina Gambacciani,” “To Signora Argia Bracaloni” . . . And the various entries had to be carefully set out and followed by their respective figures, which, as they went away, they ingenuously spelt out, or at which, if they could not read, they continued to gaze, lost in a kind of greedy wonder at the strange arabesques. And Teresa, who once upon a time had been so skilful at dealing with her illustrious clientele, dealt with equal mastery with this new clientele, pandering unerringly to its vanity: “You understand the fine points better than ladies; it would be easier to take in one of them than you.” It was not true, but the lie did a lot of good and no harm at all. They had to be told that it was only the favours of fortune which made them different from the others; apart from that, no difference existed. And Teresa knew just how to say it.

"Why, with ladies, it's only a matter of appearances. Wash their faces, take off the beautiful things they've got on, and you'll see."

They were content with small profits, corresponding both to their new type of customer and to their own diminished, and steadily diminishing, powers.

"All we can expect now . . . just enough to live on."

Only on one occasion, Carolina, in a moment of discouragement and weariness, threw down her work and, writhing and wriggling like a teetotum, cried: "Ugh! I can't bear it any longer, all these low-bred women."

But these were the last agitations of a time that could exist no more. Teresa did not reply; she went on working without even raising her head.

And the peasant women, too, made their gifts to the church for the festival of the Madonna in October—an altar cloth, a surplice for the priest, a chasuble, a cope.

Once they had grown accustomed to the change, they came to love the new type of person they had to deal with. "Poor dears," said Teresa, "they come here with their money all ready, and they're always pleased with what we do for them. Very often the grand ladies used to keep us waiting anxiously for our money, after having made us sweat blood to do what they wanted."

It must also be added that, as they succeeded in renewing their strength through making underclothes for the peasant and workingwomen of an area that grew every day alarmingly larger, so they also succeeded in re-establishing an authentic superiority in the immediate neighbourhood. They would have died rather than make a chemise for any of their old tenants; and there is no knowing what answer they would have given if their former subordinate, Fellino's wife, had gone and made such a suggestion to them. Well—would you believe it?—this partiality became highly displeasing to those who were excluded, who felt themselves on that account diminished in the eyes of the rest of the population. Fellino would have been extremely proud to

hand over to them, in return for chemises and drawers, a few shillings which, in truth, should have already been in their pockets.

“Isn’t our money as good as anybody else’s?”

“What have *we* done to those affected creatures?”

“Is it our fault that they came to grief?”

“They oughtn’t to be so stupid.”

They were consumed with rage because they could not wear, on some part of their bodies, one of those fabulous labels: “Materassi Sisters”—especially those who knew, from long and daily experience, what it meant to have such a name hidden under one’s dress.

“What have they got against us, those two rag bags, with their bird’s-nest hair—sluts that they are?”

And the two sisters, on their side:

“I’d rather have my eyes torn out than make a chemise for one of *them*.”

“I wouldn’t do it for a thousand lire.”

“I’d turn myself into a beggar, or pull up grass with my teeth, or die of hunger, before I’d sew one single stitch for them.”

And as soon as the till came into use again (without tinkling too loudly), they called Niobe.

“Look, Niobe, we can’t give you your wages as we did before, we’re too poor; but when you need anything the money’s here. Don’t worry, it belongs to all three of us; this is the common cashbox.”

Niobe fled, scandalized; she turned round at the door, before she escaped into the kitchen, and replied: “I don’t want anything at all, I don’t need anything, I haven’t a right to anything. What an idea! I should feel I was taking it off the very altar.”

Soon a growing desire began to make itself felt in the midst of their recovered tranquillity and their new-found comfort.

“We haven’t a *large* picture of Remo,” Carolina kept on saying with a deep sigh.

“You could get one of the small ones enlarged; it’s quite easily

done," Niobe said; "whichever's the best, whichever you like most."

But when they passed them in review, over and over again, time after time, they seemed incapable of deciding which one to choose. At last Niobe cut short the discussions by once again, like the good donkey which proffers its back to carry a load, proffering her own so as to take the load off the shoulders of her mistresses.

"This one," she said decisively, expressing the desire of all three, "is the best, *and* the biggest, *and* the most like him."

Her mistresses at first said no, but it was a drawling, hesitating no: and they objected that it was not quite the right thing to display, in a house of unmarried ladies, an enlarged photograph of a young man in bathing pants.

"My goodness me!" said Niobe. "That's an old-fashioned idea. There are some things you don't know anything about. Why, the young men of today are always in bathing pants; it's good for their health, and people do right to bring them up like that, because they grow up healthy and handsome and strong and goodhearted; the ones who are brought up in cotton wool, and always at their mothers' apron strings, grow up weak and pale and spiteful and hypocritical and tiresome, and you never know what's going on inside them."

And then she seized upon an unanswerable argument to convince them. "How about the statue of David in the Piazza della Signoria, eh?"

"Yes, I'd thought of that too. But you see, Niobe, when you look at the statue of David you see everything . . . and yet you don't know anything. Perhaps it's because it's made of marble that it has less effect."

"And isn't this made of cardboard?"

"Anyhow, David isn't one of our own family; besides, when everybody else is looking at him too, you don't mind so much."

"Come along . . . please," Niobe concluded. "Let me see about it for you. You know perfectly well that's the right one to have."

Carolina observed that Niobe was right, and that the others were really too small to have successful enlargements made from them, anyhow.

Niobe herself went off to Florence and had an enlargement made by a photographer in the Piazza Santa Croce. It was about two thirds of life size, and it was hung up on the middle wall in their workroom, glazed and in a beautiful frame; so that now, as you entered the room, there was the young man, high up, in between the two sisters. On each side there were two smaller frames in which were skilfully arranged all the snapshots of Remo, in many different places, in many different clothes, and amongst many different friends—Franco, Sergio, Massimo, Corrado, Renato, Piero, Bruno, Ettore, Alfredo, Jim—all of them, too, now far away on some shadowy horizon, but very close to the sisters' hearts. And, in arranging them, after three or four attempts they had contrived—just as though it had happened of its own accord—by deliberately superimposing them slightly, wherever Remo appeared beside him, to cover up Palle—"that wretched Palle!"

The peasant women admired the picture unreservedly, and, wishing to look at the little ones closely and in a good light, would take down the frames from the wall and demand explanations of what was represented in them, whether places or people—Viareggio, Montecatini, Venice, Rome, Bologna, Milan . . .

"Oh! Is *that* all!"

"How well built he is!"

"Beautifully—beautifully," put in Niobe, in parenthesis.

"How well he carries himself!"

"He looks so distinguished!"

"So very gentlemanly!"

"You can tell a gentleman even in bathing pants, my dears," went on Niobe.

It was all Teresa and Carolina could do not to embrace them then and there, and their gratitude all went into the drawers and chemises.

The women compared him with their own sons—"the one in the Army, the one who's just going into the Army, the footballer, the runner, the boxer . . ." They too seemed to wear nothing but bathing pants. "My boy too, just like *my* boy, *my* boy's made like that too, he's got some shoulders on him! You ought to see his legs! He can't keep them still . . . Mine's like that too, when he goes running . . . So's mine, when he boxes . . . As for mine, he has to be made to sleep by himself because he goes on kicking even at night, and his brothers won't stay with him . . . *My* boy's won four medals. You should see him in uniform!"

The sisters smiled, allowing their clients to make all the comparisons they wished; but they were not taken in, and when they were alone again, they quickly put matters into their proper perspective.

"Poor dears, of course they're *their* sons; it's quite right, you can't blame them."

"I suppose they'd hardly have the cheek to make comparisons where he's *dressed*?"

"Why, of course, they're just sons of rough working people—what d'you expect?"

However strong and handsome those sons might be, this young man was an exception; he was beyond discussion.

And no one made any fuss about finding a portrait of a young man in bathing pants in that room.

"You see?" said Niobe. "Was I right or not? And you were afraid it wouldn't do. I've always told you you're over-particular about these things."

"If the ladies were still coming here, I'm not at all so sure," replied Teresa. "I'm not at all sure we could have had it there. They would have wrinkled up their noses and pursed their lips, very likely."

"Yes, I daresay," concluded Niobe. "But they would have taken a good look at it first."

"Ha! Ha!"

"Ha! Ha!"

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Palazzeschi, Aldo
The sisters Materassi.

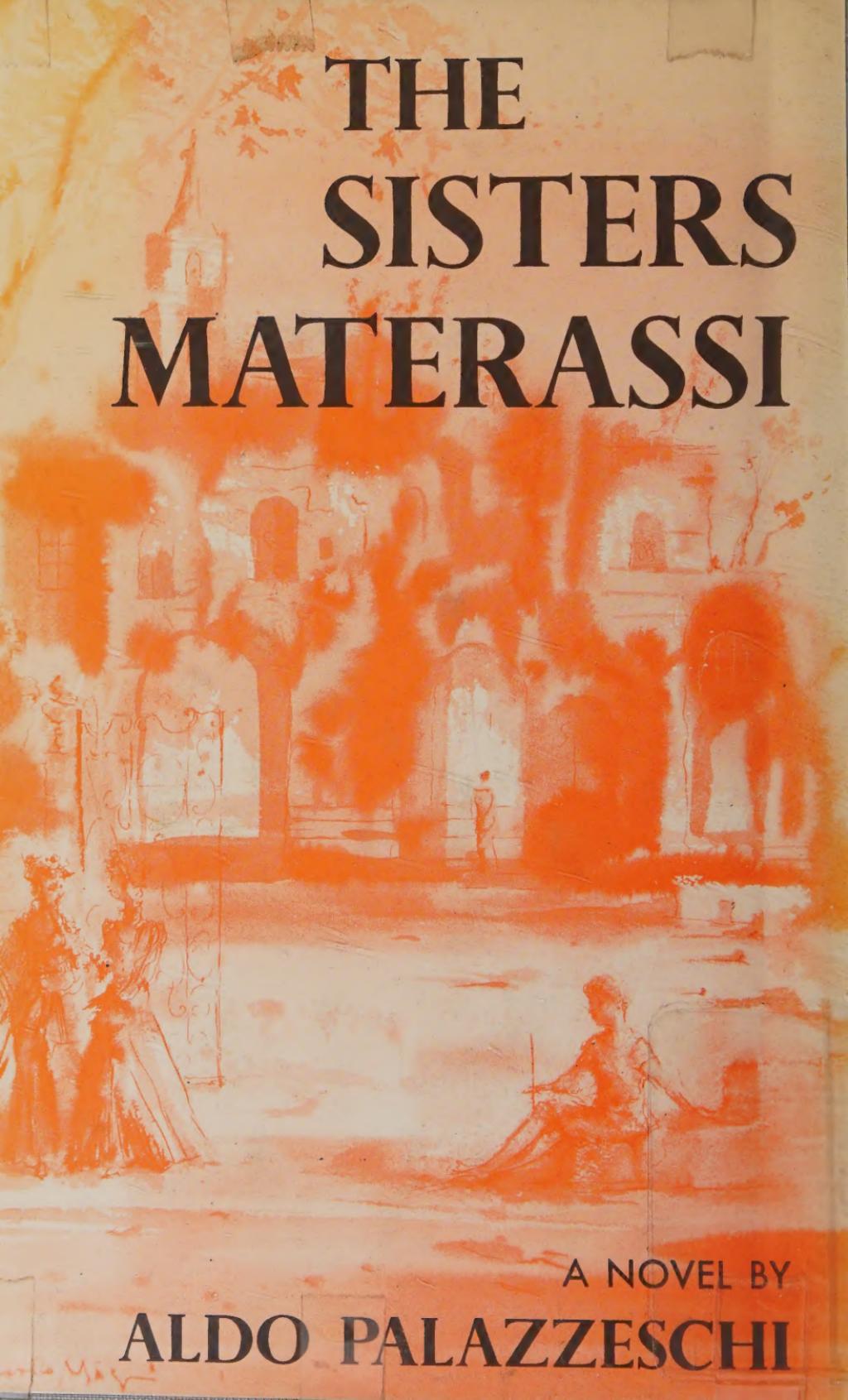
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Aldo Palazzeschi, the eminent Italian novelist, poet, and short-story writer, was born in Florence. He first became known, while still a young man, as one of the "futurist" poets who formed a circle in Florence in the early 1900s. During the First World War he served as a telegrapher in the Italian Army, having already written his successful novel, *Il Codice di Perela*. He lives now in Rome where he does all his writing in longhand. When asked if he must have quiet in order to work, he replied, "Silence doesn't exist—especially in Italy." His main interest, besides his writing, is in his beautiful collection of antique porcelain.

THE SISTERS MATERASSI is the first of Palazzeschi's novels to be translated into English. This task has been skillfully and lovingly performed by *Angus Davidson*. Mr. Davidson is well known for his expert translations of, among many other books, Berto's *The Sky Is Red* and Moravia's *Two Adolescents*.

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THE SISTERS MATERASSI

A NOVEL BY

ALDO PALAZZESCHI